

How Youth Service Programs Stay Relevant & Sustainable

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Services for youth are an integral component of any community. Schools are a prime example – a required service geared to support the positive development of youth. Some communities have much more to offer, such as community sports, after school programs, or a community center. What becomes challenging is when these resources are limited, not geared to support youth with risk factors, and when youth are not accessing these supports. This is when the faith and community-based agencies, many times in partnership with local, state, and national governments, step in to provide that intentional and critical safety net for the youth and young adults, and their families, in the community. From the moment of concept to the creation of a youth service program, a youth service provider must be thinking about an essential element – sustainability. How will this service have a lasting impact and remain integrated and relevant in the community in order to achieve the desired change we want?

[MANY](#) is a national network that engages stakeholders across sectors to strengthen outcomes for youth at highest risk for victimization & delinquency. Annually, MANY connects with over 12,000 non-profit providers, funders, and researchers, and provides intensive training and support to about 3,000 of these organizations each year. MANY tends to attract the innovators in the field and has over 165 member organizations across the country who are engaged regularly to assess emerging issues in local communities—and offer real-time solutions.

Based on our experience in working with diverse youth service agencies nationally, along with input from six youth service agency leaders from across the country representing diverse approaches to youth services, MANY has identified key considerations and strategies for agencies to include as they develop and sustain both their programs, and the services they have identified as critical to their communities.

Strategic Plan

Most agencies participate in a strategic planning process, which many times include the key stakeholders of the agency and/or of the youth program they operate. (Strategic plans can be and should be considered at a program level as appropriate – especially for large multi-service agencies). The purpose of the plan is to guide the work of the agency or program. Though most agencies have that goal in mind, actualizing that vision and keeping it as a central guiding tool is sometimes lost in the business of doing the work. Some key things to remember about your strategic plan:

- **Keep your board and key stakeholders engaged.** These are the folks that helped create the plan – finding creative ways to keep them involved in realizing the successes (and the challenges) will ensure that you continue to move forward with buy-in on your plan. Revisit your plan with your team at least annually, and if the plan is flexible and responsive, spend some time updating the key items to include current realities.
- **Develop a plan that evolves with your work.** Many times, a strategic plan becomes outdated the month after it is created. The plan should allow you to know your mission and your goals, clearly identify opportunities and obstacles, have guidelines and expectations, and include a framework for implementing the plan. It should not lay out each activity or action step with a time-frame for deliverables. Your environment and reality is ever-changing – what you need is a strong guiding document that allows you to adjust in the moment to meet emerging needs and participant demands, and capitalize on unforeseen opportunities. There are thousands of guides on strategic planning. One that MANY uses is Real Time Strategic Planning. Listen to Heather Gowdy to learn more about the basics of the process in [her Connection talk](#). Your strategic plan will guide you as you develop a business or action plan.
- **Know where you have been.** To expand what we do, we need to really learn from what we have done. Reviewing your strategic plan to identify success and obstacles is important to moving forward. Focus on developing new ways to collect qualitative and quantitative data at an agency and program level, so that you can be sure that what you are doing works and is being done in the best way possible. Then use these findings and good practices to guide your work. Know the [theory of change](#) that guides your program design. (cont. next page)

Strategic Plan (cont.)

- (cont.) Most of us are familiar with the concept of a theory of change in the context of capturing program impact but it is more than just a tool to guide effective evaluation. It provides the foundation for everything you are trying to accomplish.

Collaborative Work

If we have heard it once we have heard it a hundred times – non-profits need to collaborate. Though this is true, it becomes an empty request from a funder when true partnership or collaboration is not feasible, possible, or the best solution, and frankly, it can run against what an agency is trying to achieve. Can agencies and youth service programs work in silos and be successful and sustain their services? Absolutely not. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

- **Define collaboration.** Take the time to define what collaboration means to your agency overall, and your youth service program specifically. Also consider what collaborators you feel will support you in ensuring sustainability of your services, whether or not you are still funded to do the work. [Connect with others](#) in your community doing good work, as natural partnerships (and future possible collaborators) will emerge.
- **Look at non-traditional partners.** Youth service work requires even more collaboration. Providers are expected to be involved with other systems such as justice, housing, health, and education. These systems have a direct impact on youth and young adults, and have implications to practice. The youth with whom we work many times have contact with one or more of these systems. [Epworth Children & Family Services](#) in MO, and [Auberle](#) in PA, are two examples of agencies that have tapped into these partnerships for services (and funding). Understand that collaboration is an exchange and that you are bringing assets to the partnership. It is critical that we connect our work to these systems in order to ensure that youth in those systems have access to developmentally appropriate youth programming, and that leaders of those systems have the resources to learn more about the youth being served. In this partnership, youth service providers emerge as the youth development experts that they are.
- **Create pathways through barriers.** In some communities, the youth service program is the only gig in town – and the one stop shop for everything. Think of rural communities, and resource deprived inner cities. In this case, how does one collaborate when there is no one else to share the work? For those communities with limited resources, this may be an opportunity to look at how programs with complementary services in different communities connect with one another to share resources and information, and look at multi-community approaches to service provision. On the other end of the spectrum, think of large cities where there are many resources for youth, but no coordinated way to provide holistic services to the youth being served. How are youth best served when they often get bits and pieces versus a coordinated approach to service provision? All youth service providers should seek to learn from and replicate what works from disciplines that are building strong service coordination systems across the country where providers are working seamlessly to share referrals, information, and services to those in need, such as [A Way Home Washington](#). This is a trend that will continue, and being informed and at the table will better position your agency to be proactive and responsive. There is a national effort around coordinated responses to youth homelessness, being spearheaded by [United States Interagency Council on Homelessness](#), which provides a framework for communities to develop effective collaborations to end youth homelessness. Other unique collaboration models include state-wide approaches to service provision and funding such as with [Vermont Coalition of Runaway & Homeless Youth Programs](#) and [Wisconsin Association for Homeless and Runaway Services](#); and multi-community approaches such as with [Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Illinois](#).

Collaborative Work (cont.)

- **Celebrate our peers, partners, colleagues, and friends.** Shining a spotlight on those with whom we work is a good thing, in both the short and long term, as the field is all lifted when we support and celebrate our individual and collective efforts. As one leader noted “Because of lack of resources, there is a tendency to fight for them, which can lead to cutting each other down.” Operationally, meeting our financial goals is a reality and having a plan to keep resources flowing is crucial to sustainability of services; the question lies in how we achieve these goals. “As a social sector we are stronger when we prioritize clear, supportive alliances.”

Staffing

Youth workers make (or break) a youth service program. They are the folks who interact with your consumers – the youth and young adults that you are trying to impact. They are the key approach to your work, where the majority of your agency costs are designated. And many times, because of money and time constraints, are the least supported through ongoing and targeted personal and professional development. As such, staff retention is low – according to a [Nonprofit HR survey](#) of non-profits, nonprofits experienced 19% turnover in 2015. The primary reason that people leave their positions is not only the salary but the opportunity for growth and development – to feel valued professionally. Here are some ideas for how to develop a workforce that meets the agency’s needs of relevance and sustainability, and keeps the right people in the right positions:

- **Develop a strong, well-trained and oriented team, whose members are all aligned with the mission.** Consider the core values that support your mission. If there are staff of your agency, particularly of your youth programming, that do not believe in the positive attributes that all youth bring to the table, do not advocate for the youth and families you serve, and cannot articulate your mission, vision, and goals with enthusiasm that is catching, they may not be in the right agency. This is not just direct service staff. The culture of your agency is reflective in your team members. They are walking brochures of the important work you do. If they cannot carry the message through each task, activity, and interaction, they cannot help you to make the sustainable change that you seek. With this, also consider the background of the staff that you hire. As one agency leader put it “youth services agencies can benefit from recruiting and developing a crew/team of credible messengers who have been there and done that but have ultimately turned their lives around and want to contribute in a meaningful way. Often times these types of individuals have a level of understanding and sincerity that can be useful in immediately engaging the youth that are hard to serve and seriously at-risk.”
- **Diverse, relevant, and in-depth training and support.** The myriad of issues and challenges that youth bring to service providers is complex and there is not an easy solution. Staff need to be trained in a core approach, such as positive youth development, and then receive more training to help them understand the issues facing youth and families and how to navigate the solutions with them. Evidence-informed training should be provided specifically on issues that providers are encountering related to trauma and trauma responses, mental health, and behavior and emotional health. When youth workers are properly trained they are more confident and better equipped to assess the situation and provide the needed resources and support, therefore improving outcomes for youth.
- **Match the right people to the right job.** Sounds like basic good practices, though in our field, this can be challenging. Consider a great youth worker who connects well with youth, is passionate about the work, and whose work results in measurable outcomes. What incentives do we provide to keep them in that position? Many agencies have salary caps and leadership limitations for positions that are direct service, sometimes forcing folks who would like to advance professionally into taking positions in supervisory or administrative roles. Develop an approach that honors skill sets and contributions, from direct service to leadership.
- **Consider how today’s labor trends affect your workforce.** According to a 2014 news release from the U.S. Department of Labor, [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), the median tenure of baby boomers (cont. next page)

Staffing (cont.)

- (cont.) is 10 years and for millennials (25-34 year olds) it is 3 years. This trend appears to be a new normal across industries so youth service providers need to be prepared to respond. First, create an environment that is aligned with the workforce you are recruiting. Consider what attracts and keeps millennials in positions, such as the desire to [contribute and feel valued](#), a [real work-life balance](#) evidenced by flexible work options, and recognition and encouragement as [innovators and leaders](#) of today. Then, put in place policy and practice that helps to minimize the negative impacts of staff turnover such as keeping position descriptions updated with real-life examples of how a day looks for that position, cross-training employees which may include team-building and job shadowing, and celebrating staff transitions.

Diversified and Braided Funding & Services

Defining service needs and creating effective systems to respond is the first important steps to creating a sustainable program. Finding the appropriate resources to fund your plans is the next step. Most agencies will not receive one line of funding from one funder to meet the diverse needs of the youth and families they are serving, so looking to multiple funding sources is a necessity.

- **Decide your services first, and then find your funders.** This can be easier said than done. Funders tend to release funding opportunity announcements for very specific services to very specific populations, and to get access to those dollars, you must be responsive to the limited scope of services. It is understandable to consider how you can adjust your plans to be responsive – it is even encouraged to be flexible in your strategic planning – you just need to make sure that you are clear on whether the funding is the right fit. Create a strong fund development plan and include SMART (specific, measureable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals and monitor the progress. Chasing money that is not a good fit for your program’s mission and services plan will most likely lead to a drift in your service plans that was not pre-determined, and many times, results in services that are not developed and delivered at the highest quality.
- **Diversify your funding streams.** Do not overly rely on any one funding stream to support your services, even if that is easiest. The more reliant you are on a funding stream, the less sustainable your efforts will be as you both risk a funder pulling out of your project, and you lose the opportunity to engage other funding partners that can be just as excited with your service plans. Consider private and public funding, including local, state, and federal government funding, foundation funding, earned income, and individual donations. Even consider enterprise-driven business, such as Tumbleweed’s [Tumbletees initiative](#). And think proactively and outside of the box. As a field, we need to leverage natural partnerships and demonstrate our connection/value add to their fields. For example, healthcare is a natural home for our work as the future is about keeping people healthy in their communities. Who better to be paid to do this than the community-based agencies that are the safety net for youth and families? Consider these unique partnerships that align with your mission and demonstrate your value.
- **Braid your services.** Most likely, you are already doing this but not using the name. As discussed, identifying the service needs is first, and then getting funding is next. For example, consider a program to support youth transitioning out of foster care. Some services identified are housing, life skills training, education and employment services, mentoring, and access to mental health and other counseling services. You connect with your community collaborators and determine which services need to be developed as part of this program, for which you will find funding. These streams of funding are braided into your services to make one program experience for the young person in your program.
- **Braid your funding.** With braided services, there is braided funding, which on the administrative end can be much more complicated as each funder has their programmatic and financial expectations and requirements. It is important to have a clear system for tracking funds and services on the front end so as to ensure you remain in compliance as you piece together the funding for your services. Spark Policy Institute’s resource, [Blending & Braiding Toolkit](#), can be a good place to start this process (or to check on current practices).

- **Develop and communicate your brand.** Your brand represents your work. It helps you keep your mission in front of the community- including funders, the public, and policy makers. It is not just the color fonts and logos you use. It is how you communicate to others your mission, vision, values, and services. When people hear your agency or program name, what thoughts or feelings emerge for them about you? This is part of your brand. [“Why Branding As Strategy Matters More”](#), from Open Minds, describes the purpose and process for developing your brand. Branding is done as an organization, and it can be done specifically for your youth services program. For example, [Goodwill](#) is a well-known brand – most will know what the organization does nationally around retail stores and job training. As part of their branding efforts, service programs are branded separately and tie to their name brand, such as [GoodGuides](#) (a youth mentoring program), and [GoodProspects](#) (a web-based virtual career navigation platform). The names do not have to contain the same words – the program must be aligned with the agency’s brand and represent the services you provide.

Taking The Work Virtual

As youth service providers we are all about the human interaction – as we should be. This is how we best connect with others to work on creating positive changes. In addition to this important human touch, youth service providers need to be where the youth and families are today – and that includes using web-based technologies and platforms to reach our consumers. Imagine a street outreach program that refused to go out on the streets to connect with youth in need – most would find that approach ineffective. It is the same with the internet – if that is where youth are, that is where we must go to reach them, and at times, effectively serve them.

- **Close the digital communication gap.** As one leader stated “Youth and adults have always had a communication gap but the digital age has magnified this exponentially. Youth programs and their staff will need to be able to communicate on all platforms that appeal to young people and cannot rely on methods and materials used by adults.” Consider what this means for your youth program, as this may be very different than your standard approach.
- **Tap into social media and networking sites.** If your agency is not active on popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, become active. Understand the ever-evolving digital platforms ([here is most popular for teenagers and young adults as of February 2016](#)) and stay informed so as to best determine 1) what the platform is/does; and 2) if you can leverage that platform to support your work/purpose. Consider some big questions: Who do you want to engage? What is the purpose? What do you need to know about the various web-based platforms? How can each be leveraged to support your work/purpose? Who can best design and create content to share? What information is retained? What policies and procedures do you need to have in place? Not all platforms will meet your same needs – be thoughtful as you consider your options. And remember that texting is a social media platform too, and one which is the most used by youth. At MANY’s 2015 Connection event, Calvin Smith [talked about how technology is changing social services](#), with two examples, one including texting as a case management tool.
- **Become agile at delivering virtual programming.** Within this new reality, youth services providers will need to become less reliant on place-based programming, and consider how we take our work virtual. For example, [Jessica Trybus’s Connection talk](#) is about using gaming, in particular in workforce development programs. New applications for developing life skills, learning money management, and connecting to community resources are just a few examples of what has already been created and is available to include in your services toolkit.
- **Build the skills of the youth in your programs.** Who knows these platforms and which are most popular to your demographics better than the youth you are serving? Get them involved at every level, as it creates opportunities for youth to be empowered, exercise leadership skills, and contribute. (cont. next page)

Taking The Work Virtual (cont.)

- (cont.) Youth with support of an adult can drive this effort and help an agency to create an effective social media/web-based approach that will engage and serve the target population. These are skills that are highly sought (and that many agency staff have not yet developed), so consider how you can employ youth with these skill sets in your programs.

Youth As Active Partners, Contributors, & Consumers

What we want from all the work that we do is to create an opportunity and clear avenue for youth and young adults to succeed, however they define that success. Across the country we provide a range of services and interventions to help us make this a reality – diverse responses to meet unique needs. The overall underlying approach that should be the foundation for all of the work is positive youth development (PYD). There are some different ways to describe this approach; we recommend this [10 minute clip](#) featuring Dr. Karen Pittman, President and Chief Executive Officer of The Forum for Youth Investment, and this [interview](#) with Dr. Richard Lerner, as an introduction.

- **Keep youth voice as central to what you do.** One agency leader shared “The most important thing we are doing is staying in tune with the youth we serve and ensuring that their voices—the voices of young survivors—and the voices of staff—adult survivors—remain central to everything we do. If we lose that, we have lost our rudder.” Youth are active participants in the services your agency provides – treat them as such. From developing their own service plans to serving on your board of directors, from helping you design your youth programming to becoming staff at your agency, youth should be central to your work, and central to their personal development.
- **Listen to youth feedback.** Holding an occasional focus group or providing a satisfaction survey is not enough. Evaluate your programs to determine how effective you are in engaging, delivering services, and supporting youth. Design your quality improvement process to include evaluation tools that will measure the impact you are having on the individual by using a PYD approach. (Here is an [evidence-based tool used to help measure PYD](#), for example). Ask real questions for which you are prepared to hear the real answers, then work with youth to create the needed changes. Valerie Threfall did a [Connection talk](#) on “why organizations need to listen to the truth from youth” which provides both arguments and ideas for gathering authentic youth input.
- **Develop, deliver, and evaluate your youth programs with youth.** Sustainable and relevant youth service programming can only be created with involvement from youth. This youth-centered approach to your work will ensure you are on the right track, from the actual services to even the language you use (for example, we use “youth experiencing at risk situations” versus “at-risk youth” so as not to label the young person but rather the situation – this came from the advice of young people). Youth need to feel valued and respected in your program. You want to develop a culture that encourages youth to feel ownership over the program and the outcomes for themselves, and for others. From the time you start your strategic planning through evaluation, thread positive development opportunities into your programming.

Youth service programming is a key component of a healthy and resilient community. As such, it is the responsibility of youth service agencies to continue to assess, respond, and be proactive in developing and implementing programs that capitalize on community strengths and respond to community needs. It is not enough to do what has always been done. Relevant and sustainable agencies are constantly innovating – they are open to new ideas, flexible in change, and nimble in implementing solutions. This approach integrates services that have meaning into a community, resulting in a community culture that values and supports youth.

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