

Disability 101 for Youth Service Providers

May 21, 2024 | 1:00 - 2:30 PM ET

ABOUT US



We work with
the youth services
community



to innovate,
evaluate, + drive
effective strategies



that assure the
safety + well-being of
youth + young adults,



unlocking
their limitless
potential.

Today's Presenter

Rachel Litchman (*she/her*)

Youth Catalyst Team Consultant,
Youth Collaboratory

I have lived experience navigating homelessness as a young person with disabilities. I call that into this presentation today, since this presentation is informed both by that lived experience and outside knowledge.



Agenda



-
- Language and Definitions
-
- Understanding Ableism
-
- Disability Rights vs Disability Justice
-
- Disability and Intersectionality
-
- Disability and Youth Homelessness
-
- Takeaways and Action Steps

Shared Agreements

- Be open to hearing new ideas and be authentic in sharing your own.
- Listening is as important as talking. Listen, even if you disagree.
- We are all learning. It is ok to step out of your comfort zone and ask questions.
- Use “I statements.”
- Everyone understands that this is not a debate. The talk is a dialogue to allow open and honest engagement.
- Understand that folx have multiple identities that are valued, valid, and respected.
- Language is dynamic and personal.
- To allow for authentic conversation, practice confidentiality.
- Forms of engagement can be dynamic (engage in ways most accessible to you)

Language and Definitions



Person-first vs Identity-first

Person-first language



"I am a person with autism"

Identity-first language



"I am autistic"

Person-first vs Identity-first (cont.)

- **Remember!** There is no “right” or “wrong” here – it is about individual preference and respecting individual preference.
- There are differing historical roots of person first vs identity first language. Person-first language (saying “person with a disability”) emerged in the 1960s when people with IDD and their parents pushed against dehumanizing language in the People’s First movement. Identity first language, (aka saying “disabled person” instead of “person with a disability”) emerged as a preference from those aligned with the disability civil rights movement to emphasize disability as a political identity (1960s – 1970s).

Both are used today!

Terms Never to Use When Describing Disabled People

Never Say...

- “Differently abled”
- “Handicapable”
- Wheelchair Bound
- Retarded, stupid, dumb, cripple, freak

Instead Say...

- Disabled
- Disabled
- Wheelchair User
- Disabled

These terms suggest “disabled” and “disability” are bad words. They normalize euphemisms, and are found to be largely offensive to disabled people.

Don't use them!

Defining Disability

- There is no singular definition of disability.
- Honor self-identity.
- Understand young people may not identify as disabled even if they have mental and physical health conditions, often due to stigma and discrimination around the term “disabled”.
- State systems that have created varied, complex, and often extremely conflicting definitions of disability also often complicate whether or not a young person identifies as disabled.
- Housing insecurity and homelessness creates trauma and disability.
- Disabilities can be “visible” or “invisible” and level of disability may fluctuate daily.

Visible (*apparent*) vs. Invisible (*non-apparent*) Disabilities

- **Some disabilities are apparent - “visible”**
 - If you see someone who is using a white cane you might automatically know they are blind. Or a wheelchair user.
- **Some disabilities are non-apparent - “invisible”**
 - Many chronic illnesses come with invisible pain and fatigue
 - Mental health struggles
- **Some disabilities are both apparent and non-apparent**
 - In fact, most probably are. You cannot “see” things like pain and fatigue, which many apparently disabled people experience as well
- **Ableism may look different depending on a disability degree of apparentness**

Remember!

Disability is a Dynamic Experience

- Someone's level of disability may fluctuate daily depending on their symptoms, structural barriers, weather, or other factors.
- Just because someone's disabling symptoms change daily doesn't mean someone is "faking."

Reflect & Share

- How might differing definitions of disability make it hard for youth to access the services they need?
- How have you seen this showing up in your communities?
- **When speaking, share your name, pronouns, & where you're calling from.**



Social Model vs Medical Model

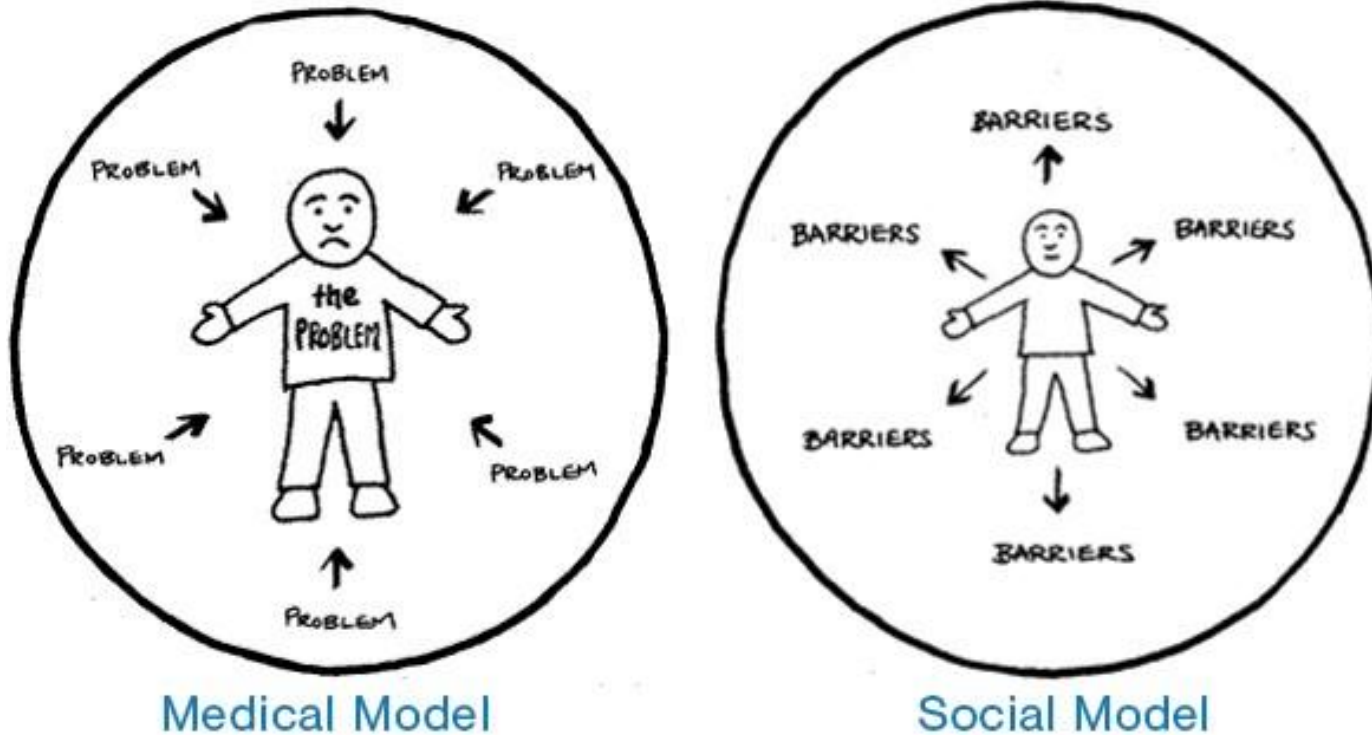


Image source: [2023 Democracy Disability and Society Group](#)

- Social Model is the one preferred by the disability civil rights movement since the medical model has historically been used to wage violence against disabled people (eradication, cure). However, it has limitations.
- The medical model is usually the dominant social frame that we have for thinking about disability. There is a focus on "overcoming" disability, cure, as a solution – individualizes the problem.

Why is it important to name these frames for thinking about disability?

- They influence social perceptions of disability as well as the forms of discrimination and harm that disabled people face.
- The medical model drives attitudes about disabled people that assume disability is inherently “bad” and that it should be avoided, eradicated, and cured because it sees life with a disability as less meaningful. It also drives very patronizing or harmful attitudes toward people with disabilities and views disabled people as not full people unless they can either hide their disabilities or strive to become non-disabled.
- Awareness of these models helps pinpoint frames of thinking that drive systemic ableism as well as provide us with tools for combating it.

Understanding Ableism



What is Ableism? (*definition from TL Lewis*)

able·ism

/ˈæbəlɪzəm/ noun

A system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.

This systemic oppression leads to people and society determining people's value based on their culture, age, language, appearance, religion, birth or living place, "health/wellness", and/or their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, "excel" and "behave."

You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

working definition by @TalilaLewis, updated January 2022, developed in community with disabled Black/negatively racialized folk, especially @NotThreeFifths. Read more: bit.ly/ableism2022

What Does Ableism Look Like?

Internalized

- Feeling worthless
- Denying yourself the right to use accessibility tools/accommodations out of fear of being perceived negatively
- Feeling like a burden
- Pushing physical limits to meet the demands of an able-bodied norm

Interpersonal

- Harassment and abuse
- Sexual, physical, emotional violence
- Doubting or questioning whether someone's disability is "real"
- Pity and infantilization
- Telling someone they must "overcome" their disabilities
- Triggering distressing symptoms

Institutional

- Disabled people's mandated poverty through state benefit structures that mandate resource/asset and income limits
- Inaccessible transit
- Institutionalization
- Lack of home and community-based services
- Sub-minimum wage

Ableism and Violence

- Disabled people have an extremely heightened risk of experiencing sexual violence. Disabled people are **3 times more likely** than non-disabled people to experience sexual abuse. People with intellectual disabilities are **7x more likely** to experience sexual abuse than people without disabilities.
- There is high incidence of caregiver abuse.
- 50% of people killed by law enforcement are disabled. More than **half of Black disabled people have been arrested** before turning 28.
- Young people may face rejection of their disabled identities at home, leading to neglect, denied care or carceral care (institutionalization), and abuse.

Reflect & Share

- How do you see ableism showing in your communities? What are you doing to address it?
- **When speaking, share your name, pronouns & where you're calling from.**



Disability Rights vs Disability Justice



Disability Rights

- Emerged in 1970s with the 504 sit-ins, a series of sit-ins at federal buildings to push for enforcement of disability civil rights.
 - **The American with Disabilities Act:** prohibits disability discrimination in employment, public & private education institutions, transportation providers, & telecommunications, regardless of federal funding.
 - **Section 504:** 504 prohibits disability discrimination by any “program or activity” receiving federal funding.
- In order to have rights enforced under the ADA or section 504, disabled people often must sue. Disabled people must also prove they have a disability, which requires medical documentation.

“Rights” are critical but high barrier.

Disability Justice

- Identified deficits and oversights in disability rights movement
- Originated by queer disabled people of color, [*Sins Invalid*](#)
- Centers solutions to systemic ableism that exist beyond and outside state systems
- Centers queer disabled people of color, disabled people experiencing multiple marginalized identities who were often left out of the disability rights movement
- Rights are a bare minimum. **We can do better than what the state says disabled people are allowed at a bare minimum**

Ten Principles of Disability Justice

1. **Intersectionality:** “We do not live single issue lives” –Audre Lorde. Ableism, coupled with white supremacy, supported by capitalism, underscored by heteropatriarchy, has rendered the vast majority of the world “invalid.”
2. **Leadership of Those Most Impacted:** “We are led by those who most know these systems.” –Aurora Levins Morales
3. **Anti-Capitalist Politic:** In an economy that sees land and humans as components of profit, we are anti-capitalist by the nature of having non-conforming body/minds.
4. **Commitment to Cross-Movement Organizing:** Shifting how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism, disability justice lends itself to politics of alliance.
5. **Recognizing Wholeness:** People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. Each person is full of history and life experience.

Ten Principles of Disability Justice

6. **Sustainability:** We pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation.
7. **Commitment to Cross-Disability Solidarity:** We honor the insights and participation of all of our community members, knowing that isolation undermines collective liberation.
8. **Interdependence:** We meet each others' needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over lives.
9. **Collective Access:** As brown, black, and queer-bodied disabled people we bring flexibility and creative nuance that go beyond able-bodied/minded normativity, to be in community with each other.
10. **Collective Liberation:** No body or mind can be left behind – only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require.

Reflect & Share

- What does it look like to support disabled people beyond a rights-based framework?
- How can you reimagine support for disabled people?
- **When speaking, share your name, pronouns & where you're calling from.**

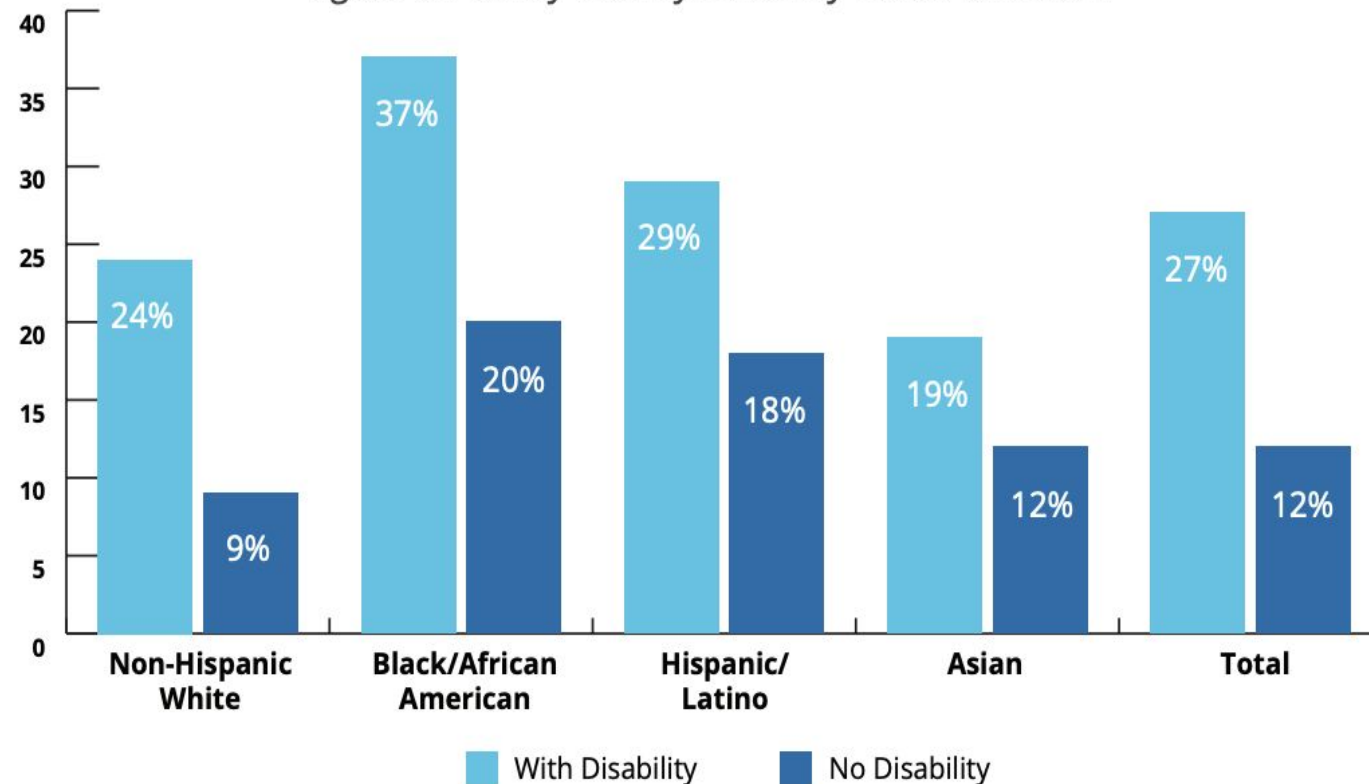


Intersections with Disability



Disability and Poverty

Figure 6: Poverty Rate by Disability Status and Race



Source: American Community Survey, 2015

- Disabled people are more than 2x more likely to be living in poverty than non-disabled people.
- The reasons for this are many, but deeply rooted in systemic oppression, including systemic racism.
- It is still legal to pay disabled people sub-minimum wage.

Race and Disability

- **Systemic racism leads to disability and worse health**
- **14% of working-age Black people have a disability compared with 11% of Non-Hispanic white people and 8% of Latinos**
 - These are likely underestimates on all counts due to the difficulty of obtaining a diagnosis
- **Medical racism often leads to delayed/denied diagnosis or overdiagnosis**
 - This has impacts on the systems young people are able to access, or leads to engagement with harmful systems that police both race and disability

Source: <https://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/disability-race-poverty-in-america.pdf>

Gender, Sexuality, and Disability

- Disabled people are less likely to receive comprehensive sexual education due to myths about disability and sexuality.
- More likely to be victims of sexual violence.
- A high number of disabled people are queer, especially folks who are neurodivergent.
- Disabled people who rely on Medicaid often face additional barriers to getting gender-affirming care due to restrictive state laws (depending on the state).
- Inability to access gender-affirming care can be disabling.

Disability and Youth Homelessness



Intersection of Disability and Youth Homelessness

- **69%** of YYA report struggling with their mental health (Uchicago study).
- In my own community, **youth with disabilities spend a longer average time homeless** (144 days) than youth without disabilities (129 days).
- Extended trauma, abuse, inability to access healthcare and health insurance or a safe living environment can lead to disability and chronic illness.
- Disability is often not reported or analyzed in demographic data the way that other identities are (e.g. race, sexuality). This makes it very difficult to know **how deeply ableism is truly impacting youth**.

How does ableism impact youth homelessness?

- Family rejection and neglect due to disabled identity.
- Disability-specific and targeted abuse.
- Beliefs that young people who have a high level of health needs are “burdens”.
- Practices such as institutionalization in short or long-term residential facilities – fractures family and community relationships. Youth in residential care have a higher risk of later running away.
- Inability to find accessible housing.
- State benefit structures that trap disabled youth in poverty.
- Difficulty obtaining access to public benefits necessary to survival.
- Intense work hours & lack of flexibility that keeps people with disabilities out of direct service work.

Barriers to Housing

- Transportation.
- Discrimination based on physical or mental health condition and requiring treatment before housing.
- Higher rents for accessible housing.
- Inadequate heating or cooling (can be life threatening).
- Physical inability to move items & high cost of paying for assistance.
- Securing medical documentation that might be needed to get accommodations.
- Inability to work enough hours to pay rent or secure lease.
- Source of income discrimination (SSI/SSDI).
- Hostile state benefit structures that place disabled people in a double-bind situation (work can improve economic situation but cause loss of Medicaid/benefits, then worsening their economic situation).

Barriers to Obtaining Supportive Services

- Most disability services require extensive medical documentation. This is high barrier!
- Systems distrust. Many disabled people distrust social services for good reason.
 - *Example: engagement in one system (e.g. workforce development) can potentially jeopardize access to SSI.*
- Inaccessibility of services (physical, language, sensory, etc.).
- Carceral responses to mental health crises (institutionalization, police involvement).
- Heightened focus on work and self-sufficiency as the primary solution to homelessness, rather than strong community connections.
- Low expectations of youth with disabilities and denied opportunity.

Reflect & Share

- What barriers are young people with disabilities facing in your communities?
- **When speaking, share your name, pronouns & where you're calling from.**



So what can
you do?



The Basics

Accessible Spaces

- Is it sensory friendly? Is there bright or flashing lighting (seizure trigger)?
- Is it physically accessible? Can someone with a wheelchair enter and exit?
- Are there signs/art on the wall honoring disabled identity, history, and community?

Accessible Services

- How does any kind of assistance you provide interact with disability-related benefits?
- Does someone need interpreting?
- Is it easier for a client to communicate via text, cell phone, video, or in person?

Accessible Relationships

- Do you have staff who are disabled?
- Do young people feel safe making disclosures around their disabilities and access needs?
- Are you openly communicating your own boundaries and availability?
- Are you meeting people where they're at?

Moving Beyond Rights: Toward Justice & Liberation

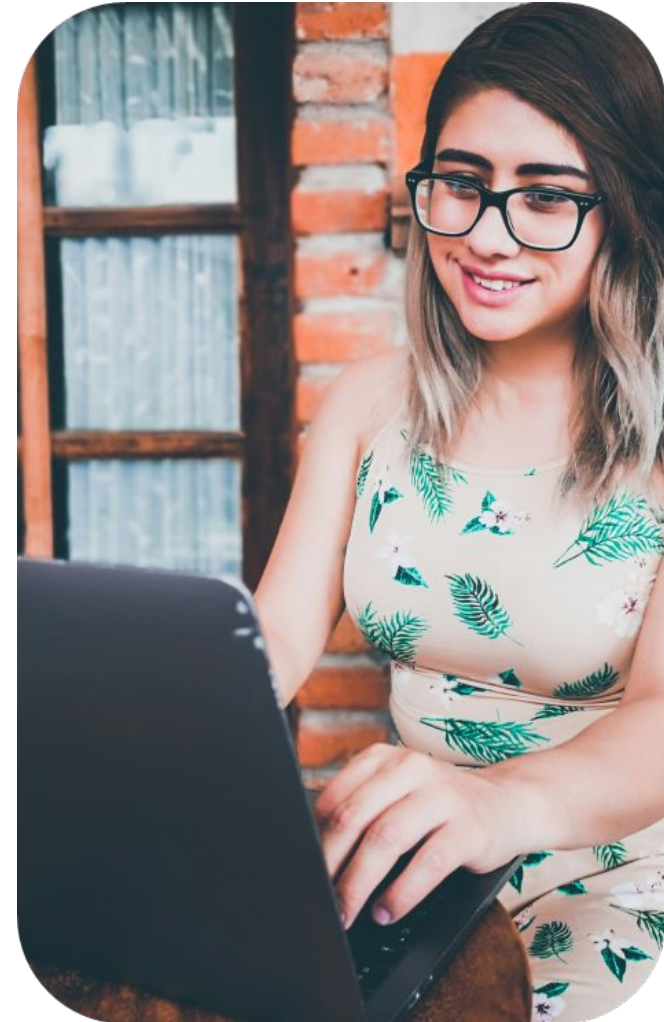
- Think beyond “rights” and move toward “justice.” For example, rights are not enough to guarantee housing is accessible since many buildings are not required to be by the law.
- Never force disability disclosure. Build a consistent and enduring relationship with a young person so they feel safe enough to trust you with that information.
- Provide transportation.
- Never require medical documentation unless it is legally required for certain services.
- Understand disability justice isn’t just for people who identify as disabled. It benefits everyone walking through the door.

Cross-System Collaboration

- **Department of Vocational Rehabilitation**
 - Can help young disabled people who are hoping to work with achieving job goals through covering the cost of otherwise unaffordable but necessary adaptive equipment such as wheelchairs, adjustable desks and chairs, adaptive shoes, etc.
- **Disability Resource Centers in Educational Institutions**
- **Independent Living Centers**
 - Can loan adaptive equipment, provide advocacy.
- **Transportation**
 - Paratransit and non-emergency medical transit.
- **Local Disability Cultural Organizations**
 - You may or may not have them in your area.

Learning Resources

- [Sins Invalid Disability Justice Audit Tool](#)
- [Ten Principles of Disability Justice](#)
- [Person first vs Identity first language](#)
- [Invisible vs visible disabilities](#)



QUESTIONS?



Contact Us

Rachel Litchman

rachel@youthcollaboratory.org

[@racheldlart](https://www.instagram.com/racheldlart)

www.racheldl.com

Youth Collaboratory

412-366-6562

www.youthcollaboratory.org



Upcoming Events

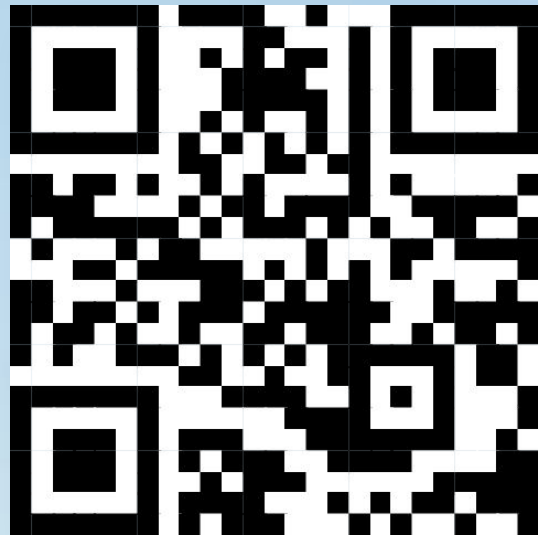
May 29th Webinar

[Centering Black Girlhood: Perspectives from Foster Care](#)

ICYMI, Our May Newsletter

[Charting New Paths: Understanding and Support for Migrant and Undocumented Youth](#)

LET US KNOW HOW WE'RE DOING



Evaluation Link: <https://forms.gle/Ev3gHrpyMYHeTSsh8>

THANK YOU