

Transformative System Design Supporting Young Adults

This resource was created by the Youth & Young Adult Transformation Team of the National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Child, Youth, and Family Mental Health (NTTAC) as an overview of the foundations of young adult transitions. We explore the challenges that young adults experience in traditional systems, key learnings from System of Care, and policy and systemic changes that are needed. We also offer questions to reflect on with your team.

Three Layers of Transition

Creating better outcomes for young adults involves recognizing that three developmental stages are happening at once:

- Individual Developmental Transition
- Family Developmental Transition
- Institutional Transition

Individual developmental transition is complicated by the intersectionality of a difficult developmental stage and mental health concerns. The development changes experienced in young adulthood accumulate gradually over time. Alongside these gradual changes, young adults are also building their own capacities. It is important to recognize and value the natural process of learning and growth in this developmental stage which includes testing boundaries and developing decision-making practices. The intersection with this transition with the family development transition and institutional transition is important to consider. Relationships between young adults and family members are naturally shifting during this time. The complexity of the institutional transitions can overwhelm rather than support if not designed to support the individual developmental transition.

Family members can be critical natural supports but they must negotiate the transition in their shifting role and in the family construct as a young person ages. Considering a broad definition of “family” for young adults of transition age, the definition should include both biological family and family of choice. The function of familial supports throughout this transition is vital. The role of family extends beyond both sides of this individual transition and thus should be considered and included in the system of supports offered. Creating policies that support the position of family members in the practice of supporting young adults is import.

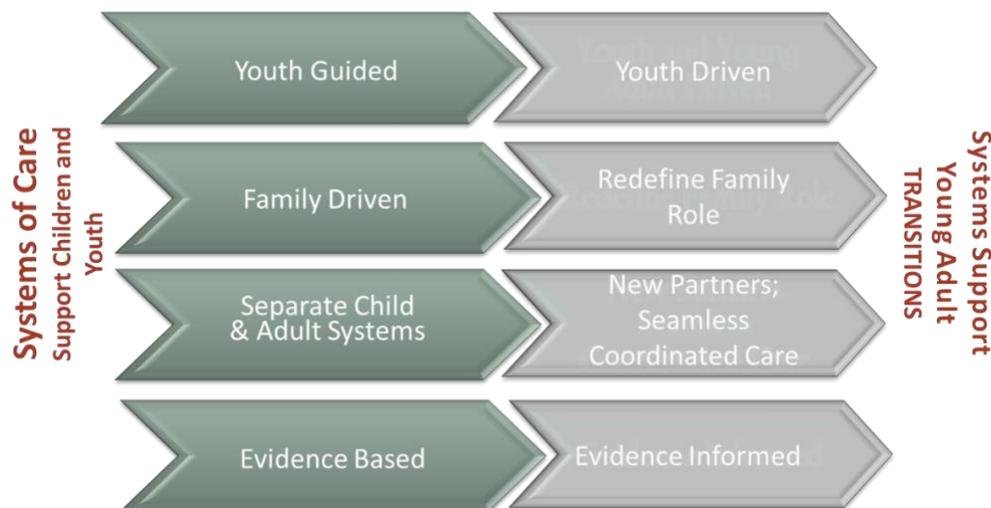
For young adults and families, developmental changes accumulate slowly over time throughout these transitions. Institutional transitions tend to be bureaucratic and are often based on rigid age criteria rather than functional capabilities or other eligibility criteria that would allow for a more gradual transition. This reality pushes against the other transitions occurring and can

create barriers in effectively supporting young adults. It is also important to know that neither the child or adult mental health systems were designed to specialize in the unique needs of young adults of transition age. This has led to a lack of developmentally appropriate services and concerns that young adults are missing out on needed supports in the transition from child services to adulthood support.

Changing Services and Practice

Young people in late adolescence and early adulthood who experience serious mental health challenges confront a variety of obstacles that can impede their access to mental health and other services, and that contribute to low rates of utilization of the available services and supports. What is more, these young people typically have complex needs that cannot be met within a single agency or organization, or even within a single youth system. Furthermore, depending on the young person’s age, the services and supports received may be provided through child systems and/or adult systems; thus, there is an additional need for coordination across the “divide” between child and adult systems.

Adapting System of Care (SOC) to the population of young adults transitioning into adulthood with mental health challenges has great value added for young adults receiving services, their families, and their communities. The SOC approach has the potential to significantly improve outcomes for this group. When planning for services and supports for young adults of transition age, it is critical that communities be intentional about the elements of the service delivery model that are essential to the service approach and those which require specific enhancements for young adults. This is a visual of some of the necessary components of the shifts necessary in a system of care when we move from child- to adult-serving systems.



(Graphic: Now Is The Time Technical Assistance Center, 2014)

A transition process based in a System of Care framework is **most effective** when it:

- Is responsive to the developmental realities of young adults
- Includes practice shifts and improvements in service provision
- Involves multiple youth- and adult-serving systems and
- Includes robust family involvement.

These changes should inform and be informed by policy change. The policy-to-practice / practice-to-policy loop is an important part of sustainable change in building a System of Care. Changes in both policy and practice will be necessary to meet the needs of young adults.

Critical and necessary service changes, and the resulting policy changes, can be found in this chart (Bergan & White, 2017).

| Lessons Learned | Considerations for Replication |
|---|---|
| Engagement is different | Funding needs to respect the difference |
| Enrollment is different | Funding needs to respect the difference |
| Respect and understanding of youth culture is critical | Involves different ways of doing business |
| Young adults want a job and a place to live | Housing and employment partners and services needed |
| High incidence of trauma | Implement trauma-informed care practices |
| High perception of opportunity | Service delivery process that focuses on hopes and dreams |
| Flexibility is necessary | Build the plane while flying it |
| Community-based and easy access | Super Wal-Mart is a good idea |
| Young adults do not belong to any one system | Develop relationships and partnerships from the beginning |
| Planning works | Keep returning to planning |
| Input from young adults is critical on all levels | Find funding for a statewide youth council |
| Court stakeholders from the beginning | Establish shared values that acknowledge each system |
| Administrative commitment is essential | Champions are necessary |
| Peer support is a critical part of the services and support continuum | Budget to fund peer support |

Changes to Policies and System Structures Required

Policy change at the local, state, and federal level is a critical tool for better outcomes. The goal is to build collaborative bridges that allow for age-appropriate and appealing services supported by strong policy.

In 2005, the federal agencies working with young adults of transition age met and identified policy recommendations (Davis & Koyanagi, 2005). These policy tenets continue to be relevant to the field.

Innovations in policy change are still informing change in effective supports for young adults. The central policy tenets to support better outcomes have now been expanded to include tenets around peer support and equitable systems. You can see all the unique policy considerations for supporting young people as they transition to mature adulthood here.

Central Policy Tenets – Expanded

1. Provision of continuity of care from ages 14 to 29
2. Continued support of family role throughout transition
3. Provision of continuity of care across the many systems that offer relevant youth services
4. Promotion of a density of developmentally appropriate services from which individualized service and treatment plans can be constructed
5. Support of expertise to support this age group and disability population
6. Advancing an anti-racist system which is equitable and responsive to diverse young adult populations
7. Implementation of peer delivered services

(Davis & Koyanagi, 2005, with adaptations added by the TA Network in 2020)

Guiding Questions

Ready to pursue policy change in these areas? Here are questions for system leaders, service providers, and advocates to address to begin identifying needed change strategies.

- Are young adults identified in children’s services and provided age-tailored services?
- Is there a formal or informal agreement between the adult- and child-serving systems?
- Can young adults access adult services and are developmentally appropriate services available?

(Koroloff, Masselli, & White, 2014)

Additional questions which assess the receiving environment as young adults begin to use adult services can be found here.

- Can young adults access adult services and are developmentally appropriate services available?
- Do criteria for accessing adult mental health services exclude some young adults?
- Is there a variety of developmentally appropriate services in the adult system from which individualized service and treatment plans can be constructed?
- Are service coordinators available in the adult system that have been trained on working with young adults?

(Koroloff, Masselli, & White, 2014)

Assessing and identifying needed policy changes is only the start to change initiatives.

The Policy Change Process

- Defining the issue (this is what you want to change)
- Partnering with others
- Identifying a possible policy change
- Educating stakeholders and broader community (assessing readiness)
- Advocating for the policy change
 - Sometimes you start over here!
- Implementing the change
- Evaluating effectiveness
 - Begin again!

Policy change involves a unique blend of small changes over time to reach major system transformation. The entire change process should include young adult and family partnerships.

The information presented in this document is a compilation of learnings from technical assistance providers over years of support provided to federally funded initiatives to support system enhancement and innovation for young adults of transition age including the Healthy Transitions Initiative, Now Is the Time Healthy Transitions, Children’s Mental Health Initiative System of Care grants, and others. Summary contributions offered here by Gwendolyn White and Johanna Bergan.

References

Bergan, J., & White, G. (19 January 2017). Transitions Learning Community Kick Off. The TA Network. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfPMECG-IAA>

Davis, M., & Koyanagi, C. (2005). Summary of Center for Mental Health Services Youth Transition Policy Meeting: National Experts Panel. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.umassmed.edu/globalassets/center-for-mental-health-services-research/documents/products-publications/reports/age-youth/youthtransitionpolicymeeting.pdf>

Grantee Kick-off Webinar. (13 November 2014). Now Is The Time Technical Assistance Center. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Koroloff, N., Masselli, B., & White, G. (2014). Game Changer: Developing Services and Support for Transition Age Youth. Guam.