Y-ReCONNECTS Juvenile Justice Reentry Initiative

Project Impact Report

Cornell University's Yang-Tan Institute on Employment & Disability

Website: https://yreconnects.org/

ILR Yang-Tan Institute

Y-ReCONNECTS

NEW YORK STATE Council on Developmental Disabilities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Youth Reentering the Community through Opportunity, Networking, Navigation, Education, Collaboration and Transition Support (Y-ReCONNECTS) initiative emphasized the cross systems collaboration needed to effectively support the community reentry of justice involved youth with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD).

Project Impacts

Through the creation of the Y-ReCONNECTS Juvenile Justice Reentry Community of Practice, and the provision of training, technical assistance, and educational resources targeted to systems professionals and other service providers, families, and youth of different backgrounds and experiences, this project positively impacted counties throughout New York State and beyond. Tioga and Warren counties were subgrantees, and Washington County, which was involved in Warren's local CoP, was contracted to participate as a mentee county in the final year of the project. Each of these counties created programs and protocols to better address the needs of systems-involved youth with disabilities. Over the course of the grant cycle, all reported improved confidence in their ability to work with young people with I/DD, as well as development of a sense of empowerment as they came to understand that they can affect change, regardless of their title or position. Numerous others benefitted from Y-ReCONNECTS trainings, which were open to stakeholders across the state and/or nation. Project impact also includes dozens of print and video resources on the public-facing Y-ReCONNECTS project website. As reflected throughout this report, the most significant impacts of this project include:

- Creating *connection/community/collaboration* within and between counties, and with community partners, resulting in a sustainable CoP in which participants feel supported to challenge the status quo.
- Fostering a sense of *empowerment* through participation in the CoP and receiving training and guidance about essential topics such as trauma, disability, and the elements of effective collaboration.
- Promoting *system change*, which occurred as participants saw themselves as able to effect change and became willing to implement promising and best practices for serving system-impacted youth and young adults.
- Instilling *hope*, which was identified as an important element of effective service delivery. This project gave providers a sense of hope in their ability to reimagine and change systems, and this hopefulness benefits the youth and families that they serve.

"How do you put a price on that? …What makes …[a] young person, or anybody, wake up in the morning and feel like they can be hopeful that things are going to be better, that…they belong to the community?"

~ Cost-Benefit Analysis Interviewee

Resources Created

In addition to the Y-ReCONNECTS community of practice, which is a resource that will continue within and across Tioga, Warren, and Washington Counties, another key resource created for this project is the Y-ReCONNECTS project website, https://yreconnects.org/. The website houses dozens of print and video resources, presented by a diverse group of experts with personal and/or professional expertise. Content was created and selected for a range of stakeholder groups. The bulk of resources on the website were created specifically for this project.

Each participating county also created resources. For example:

- Tioga County created videos to help youth understand what to expect at a job fair.
- Warren County created an extensive web-based resource map.
- Washington County created space to welcome youth reentering the community and provide access to information about community resources.

Additional details about the project website, training, and other resources developed by Cornell and the participating counties are provided later in this report.

OUR VALUES

The voices of the most impacted: We recognize people with lived experience and their support networks (i.e. families, etc.) are primary experts in building system capacity to support positive re-entry activities and outcomes.

Each person as an individual: We support processes for delivering services and responding to needs that are strength-based, person-centered, and culturally relevant.

Dignity of choice: We strive to ensure that youth are afforded dignity of choice and control in directing their lives.

Systemic change for improved outcomes: We engage in systemic responses that are dynamic and include non-traditional partnerships and approaches that account for the unique, individual, and intersectional needs and interests of youth.

"...this project makes us think about new ways we can do things."
~ Amy Secor, Warren County

Lessons Learned

The Y-ReCONNECTS initiative created an opportunity for county-level CoPs to learn from and with each other to improve their own practices. As they applied what they learned, they reported improved outcomes for youth and changes within their organizations. In addition to funding, training and technical assistance was essential to the success of the project. Participants benefitted from the range of training topics and the variety of ways in which information was made available. Training about trauma-informed service delivery, interacting with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, elements of effective cross-systems collaboration, and how justice system involvement impacts employment were among the most helpful. Requiring subgrantees to share their learnings with other counties enabled cross-county partnerships and greater project impact and supported sustainability. Creating opportunities for participants to hear, first-hand, the stories and experiences of youth and family members was very impactful in enhancing understanding of the need to center youth voice, and to improve communication with youth and families throughout the process from initial involvement with the juvenile justice system through reentry. The use of varied approaches to teaching critical concepts increased participants' knowledge and ability to implement best and promising practices. It also modeled ways that the counties could make their own content more accessible to different types of learners.

There were other lessons from challenges faced during the grant cycle. For one, building a sense of trust and community through only an online presence was a challenge. Due to the COVID pandemic and related travel restrictions, the first in-person event was not held until October 2022,18 months after creating the CoP with the subgrantees. After a few in-person events, participants were more inclined to reach out and request guidance as they sought to meet the goals of the grant. Another challenge was that the fiscal processes of Cornell and NYS CDD created considerable work and confusion for staff and CoP participants, who had

both program implementation and administrative responsibilities. In a community-focused project such as this, which benefitted from the perspectives of providers and community members who are unfamiliar with contracts and subgrantee requirements, more support and streamlined approaches for budget preparation and invoicing would have been helpful.

Looking Ahead

Through the generosity of NYS CDD, Cornell's Yang-Tan Institute has expanded its work with systems-impacted youth, establishing this as a focus area for the Institute. The Y-ReCONNECTS website will be retooled as " Y-Reconnects," a hub for all YTI projects designed to learn about and address the needs of systems-involved youth with disabilities. The site will maintain content from the Y-ReCONNECTS initiative, and resources from two other projects; one about vocational rehabilitation services for youth involved in the justice and/or foster care system, and another project that teaches systems-impacted youth speech and debate skills will be added. YTI is currently awaiting word on a federal grant proposal for further research about this population and will continue pursuing funding for other projects of this kind. CoP participants have committed to continuing to work together to sustain and expand upon their local level efforts. They have also expressed interest in collaborating with YTI in the future. We look forward to these opportunities!

Project Lead: LaWanda Cook
Project Lead Title: Senior Extension Associate
Project Team Members, Matt Saleh, Carol Blessing, Adene Karhan, & Lucy McDonald
Date: April 30, 2024

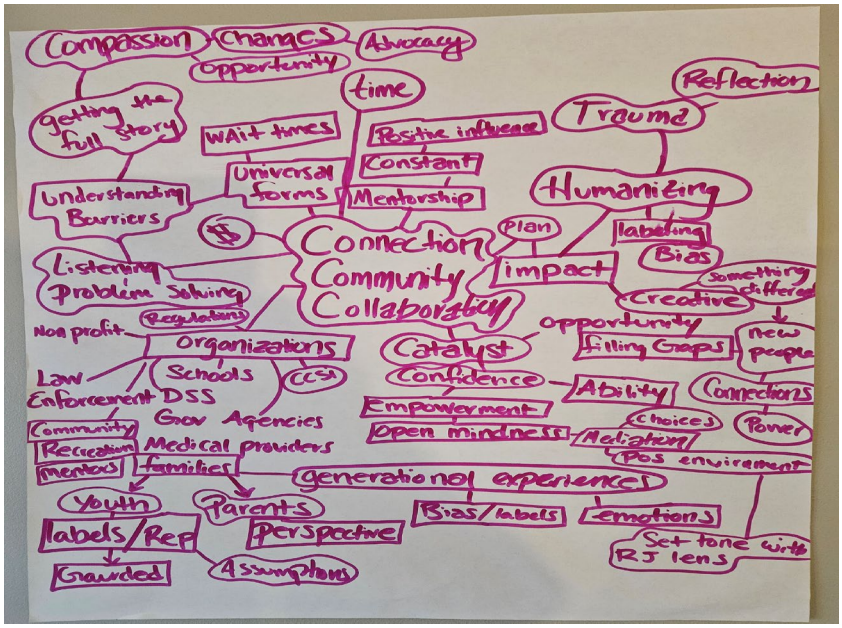
Meet the Participants!

Y-ReCONNECTS CoP participants included stakeholders from Tioga, Warren, and Washington Counties. Each county-level CoP consisted of representatives from entities such as juvenile probation, vocational rehabilitation and/or workforce development, and local school systems, as well as youth and family representation. All counties offered new or enhanced employment services to youth through the Y-ReCONNECTS project. They also increased engagement with parents and others in youths' support networks. Through mentoring relationships and career exploration programs developed with local businesses, CoP participants helped to strengthen youths' sense of community belonging.

TIOGA COUNTY

Contact: Lisa Weston-Bialy, Cornell Cooperative Extension Tioga County lw345@cornell.edu

The Tioga County CoP, **Youth Opportunity Now**, is a coalition of 13 service agencies, six county departments, and five secondary and post-secondary educational entities working toward system change to improve outcomes for youth with disabilities and at risk of legal system involvement.



As a rural county with limited resources, collaborations occurred with individuals and organizations in surrounding areas such as Broome County. The Tioga CoP's impacts under the Y-ReCONNECTS project include:

- More than 75 hours of training for local service providers addressing topics such as disability awareness, motivational interviewing, crisis intervention, vicarious trauma, ACES, financial social work, and reentry.
- A pilot in-school apprenticeship program for at-risk youth, which will continue through the 2024 school year with funding from the Youth Bureau.
- Improved cross agency collaborations and "warm hand-offs."
- A pilot program to improve transition from school to workforce and postsecondary education by providing direct support with job readiness and opportunities for up to 400 hours of paid apprenticeship training.
- Videos and other materials for youth and employers to improve engagement at job fairs.
- Monthly education sessions addressing immediate needs, stress management, and life after incarceration for inmates at the County Jail. Since its July 2023 inception, more than 100 people have participated in the program.

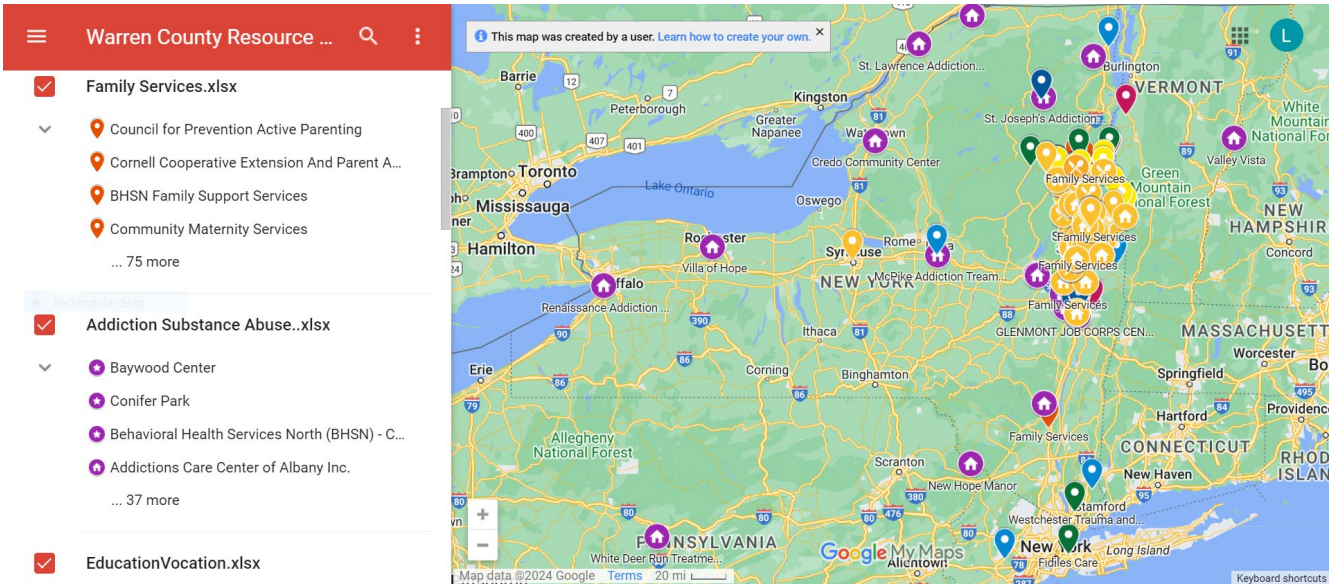
"I didn't realize how much anger I carry with me every day, and how quick I am to react. I needed this. I am so glad I came today."
~ Participant, Tioga County Jail Education Program

"…thank you for the information on getting my documents…prior to coming here, my house had burnt down, and I was able to use that information to help my family get the documents we needed."
~ Participant, Tioga County Jail Education Program

WARREN COUNTY

Contact: Amy Secor, Warren County Probation Department secora@warrencountyny.gov

One of Warren County's impactful outputs from the Y-ReCONNECTS project was the creation of the Warren County Resource Map. This useful tool helps individuals and organizations to locate a range of resources in Warren and surrounding counties.



As members of the Warren County CoP embraced restorative justice practices, holistic, trauma-informed approaches, and family involvement, their community partners did too! This led to many "ripple effects", including:

- New collaborations between CoP partner organizations.
- Creation of the WAIT House Youth Board.
- Schools implementing restorative justice practices through other grants and resources.
- Community agencies implementing restorative justice practices.
- Engagement of community members in various new projects.

- Improved individual understanding of restorative practices.
- Development of trauma informed inclusive policies.
- Life-long mentor relationships through Big Brothers/Big Sisters.
- Connections with Big Brothers/Big Sisters and schools.

"...[they] are doing so well right now...what a shame it would have been to discharge (them) to the street in the middle of winter if we used our old approach."
~ Jason McLaughlin

Through involvement with Warren's CoP, WAIT House has fostered a stronger sense of community with youth *and* improved staff retention! Executive Director Jason McLaughlin describes the power of restorative justice practices and the benefits of the Y-ReCONNECTS project at https://yreconnects.org/community.html.

"They don't ask us who our children are. They're just criminals."
~ Daphanne, parent, and CoP participant

WASHINGTON COUNTY

Contact: Shaun Etu, Washington County Youth Bureau Alternative Sentencing
setu@washingtoncountyny.gov

Washington County and Warren County share resources to meet the needs of systems-impacted youth. Active in Warren's local CoP since it began, as a mentee county, during the

final grant year, Washington County received funding, training, and technical assistance to develop their own initiatives. They focused their efforts on making services more accessible and welcoming to youth, by centering the voices and experiences of the youth they serve.

Washington County created a more formal exit interview process for all youth programs. During the exit interview, youth have an opportunity to discuss the program from their point of view. The County will use youths' feedback to continually update programming to ensure positive impacts for future participants. A new follow-up protocol has also been established to check in with youth and families 30 days and six months after program completion. Additionally, the county designated a space as a "reentry center" to welcome returning youth to the community and provide access to information about resources for successful reentry.

"...The voices of youth with lived experience should be central to the work of system transformation."

~ Carol Blessing, Y-ReCONNECTS Project Team Member

Participant Responses to a Continuing Legal Education Program for the NYS Bar Association with LeadAbility and LawNY

Ethics of Working with Individuals with Diminished Capacity in the Legal Setting

"I enjoyed learning about how others may process information. I think it will help me to maximize effective communication with this population"

"(…) very helpful and informative! I wish judges were mandated to take these types of webinars."

"I loved hearing from the Self Advocate Educators. They did great!"

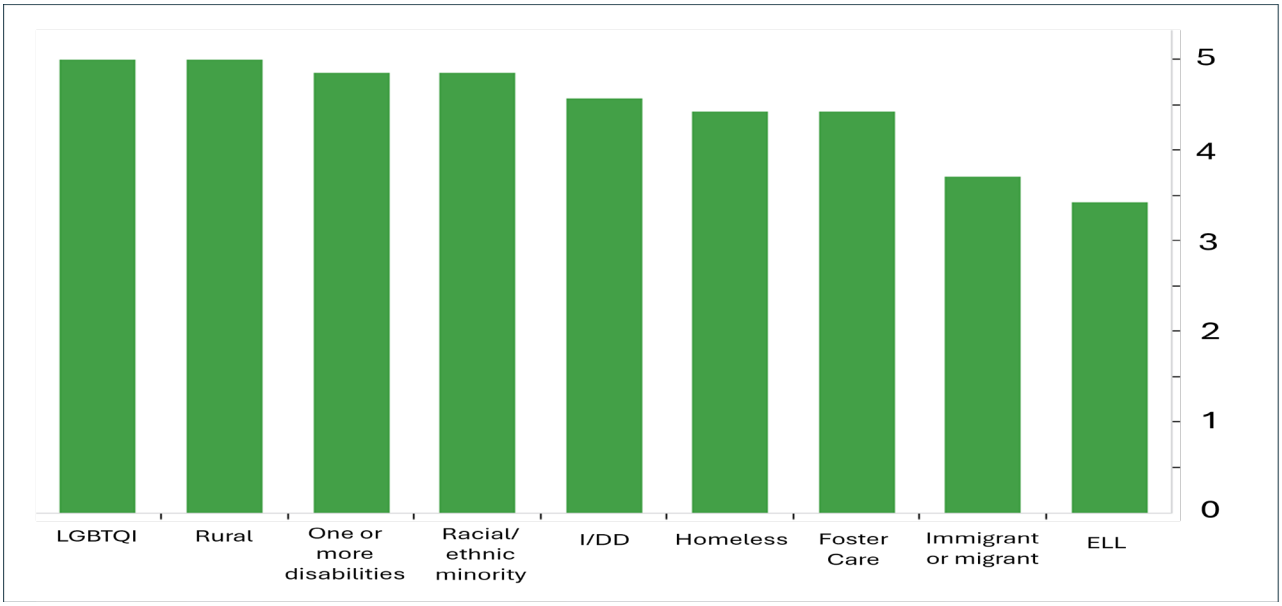
"Great…Applicable to not only our jobs, but our lives!"

Impact By The Numbers

More than 265 stakeholders participated in the trainings and other events facilitated and/or hosted by the Cornell Project Team. Additionally, Tioga hosted events providing more than 75 hours of training for stakeholders in Tioga and neighboring counties, and Warren and Washington Counties hosted multiple trainings specifically for local CoP members and their community partners, engaging more than 300 people.

To gauge the impact of the Y-ReCONNECTS project, CoP participants completed self-assessment surveys in four “waves.” Responses were collected at the beginning of Program Years 3, 4, and 5, and in Y5Q4.

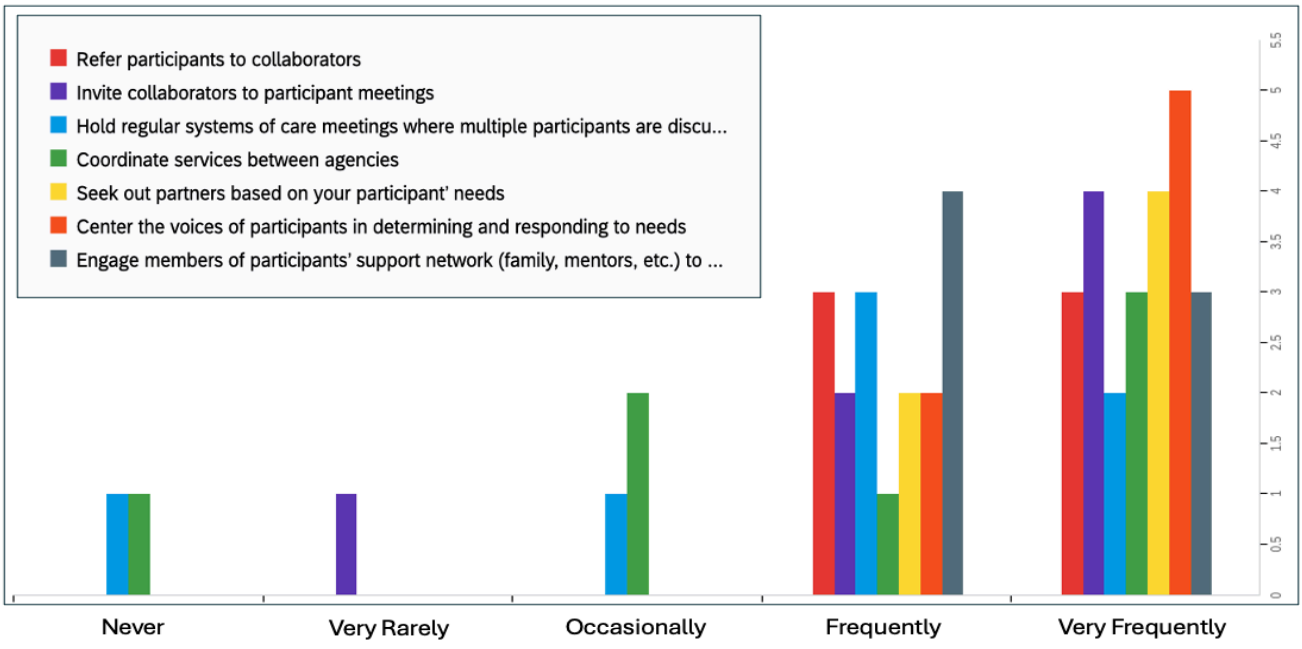
Confidence Serving Different Youth Populations



Confidence for serving youth with I/DD increased with each "wave" of data collection, up from 3.61in Wave 3 to 4.57 in Wave 4. Confidence for serving justice-involved youth with one or more disabilities also increased from 3.78 in Wave 3 to 4.86 in Wave 4.

"The providers identified the need for a bottom-up approach that involved the youth/families in the process of improving outcomes for youth."
~ Kendell Coker, Consultant

Implementation of Best Practices



Respondents to the Wave 4 self-assessment survey reported that they are "frequently" or "very frequently" engaging in key collaborative practices identified in the literature.

Collaboration Practices

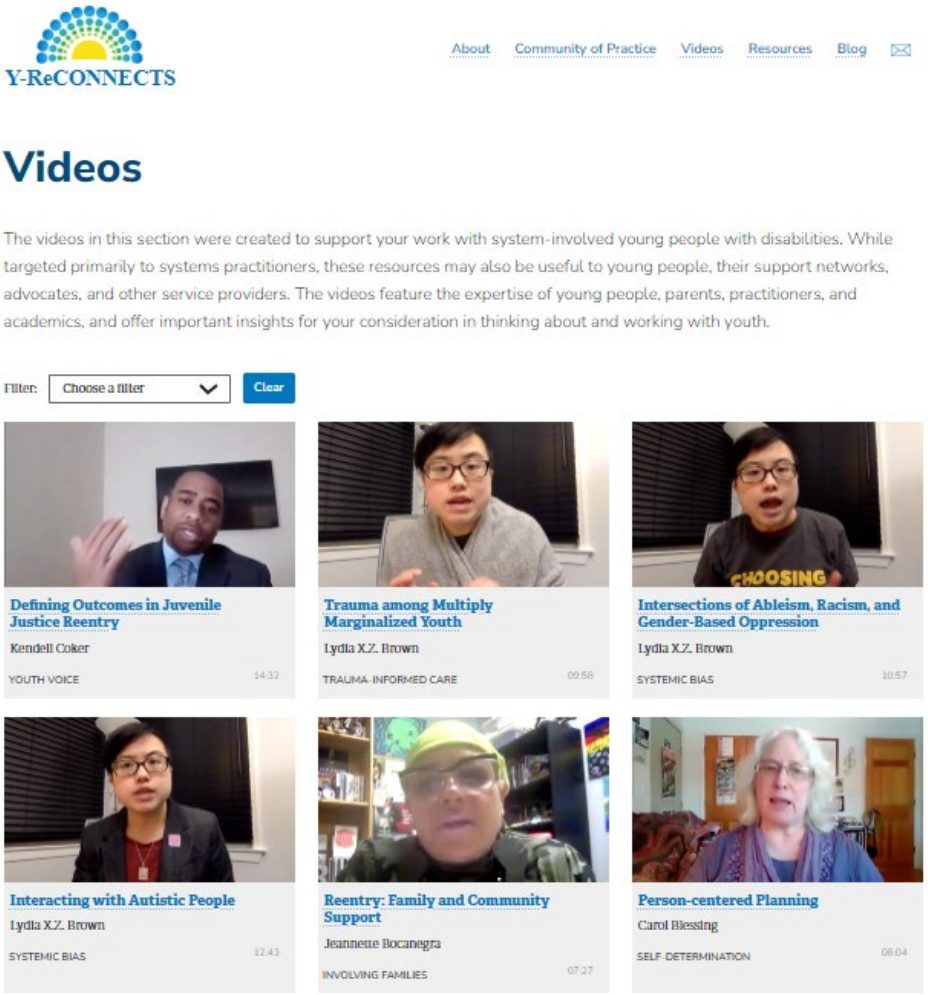
	Wave 3	Wave 4	Change
Refer participants to collaborators	5.08	5.50	↑ .42
Hold regular systems of care meetings where multiple participants are discussed	4.00	4.57	↑ .57
Seek out partners based on your participant' needs	5.33	5.67	↑ .34
Center the voices of participants in determining and responding to needs	4.78	5.71	↑ .93
Engage members of participants' support network (family, mentors, etc.) to enhance understanding of needs	4.61	5.43	↑ .82

Self-assessment survey respondents reported increased implementation of key collaboration practices from Wave 3 to Wave 4.

RESOURCES CREATED

71.4% of respondents to the fourth self-assessment survey reported using the Y-ReCONNECTS technical assistance and online resources "frequently."

The Y-ReCONNECTS project website https://yreconnects.org/ houses dozens of resources in various formats – blogs, vlogs, videos, PowerPoint presentations, factsheets, etc. - addressing a range of topics of interest to different stakeholders. Many of the resources on the website were specifically created for the project, such as a glossary of terms to help readers understand the sometimes unclear or inconsistent language used to describe justice system involvement: https://yreconnects.org/glossary.html. Videos about everything from self-direction, to working with families, to intersections between ableism and racism, were primarily created and presented by people who identify as systems-impacted and/or disabled; these videos include downloadable written summaries in both English and Spanish. A summary of a landscape analysis of juvenile justice programming in NYS can also be found on the site. Two of the most extensive resources created for the website are the Resources for System Transformation Course and the Learning from Families VLOG Series.



Resources for System Transformation is a six-module course based on the Reentry Ambassador Training. The initial RA training was provided to a subset of CoP members who were charged with sharing what they learned with other participants in their local CoP and helping ensure that local-level work was consistent with the best and promising practices reflected in the modules. The final course was created to be available to anyone through the public website. Individuals and anyone working in or impacted by juvenile justice and other systems can benefit from learning and applying the information presented in the course.
Take the Course

"I felt sick all the time-and embarrassed. Like I was being viewed as the worst mother that I had already screwed up my child's life and future."
~ Sue, parent, and CoP participant

Learning From Families VLOG Series is a set of five video-recorded interviews with parents from the Y-ReCONNECTS community who were kind enough to share their lived experiences, insights, and recommendations. The VLOGS are:
Keep Families Connected
Left Out of the Process
Transition Planning – Start with the End in Mind
What We Think is Important for System Transformation
Watch Party and World Café Conversation: Promoting System Change

In addition to the above publicly available resources, we created resources for CDD's internal use in determining state-level needs to be addressed in future projects. These include a landscape analysis that confirmed how little consideration is given to I/DD in juvenile justice programs across the country, a systematic review of relevant literature on best and promising practices for serving system-involved youth with I/DD and other disabilities, which indicated a need for more robust research on this topic, and a qualitative cost-benefit analysis of community-based approaches to juvenile justice in NY State, which suggests that while they may initially be more time-intensive, community-based approaches can be more cost-effective and beneficial to youth, families, and communities.

LESSONS LEARNED AND/OR RECOMMENDATIONS

"The panel presentation was excellent. [It] included…their stories as well as strategies for doing our work differently."
~ Employment Panel Event Attendee

- Time, training, technical assistance, and funding contributed to CoP members' willingness and ability to affect change.
- The range of topics and formats for training were appreciated and helped CoP members to see how to operationalize the learnings in their daily work.
- Requiring subgrantees to share what they were learning with other counties helped foster ongoing collaborations.
- Stories are powerful. The pre-kickoff event for the grant as well as several training and TA offerings featured the stories of people directly impacted by various systems. These stories, along with training about trauma-informed service delivery, were reportedly very impactful.
- It is challenging to build a sense of trust and community through only an online presence. Due to the COVID pandemic and related travel restrictions, we did not host an in-person event until October 2022, 18 months after creating the CoP with our sub-grantee county teams.
- The fiscal processes of Cornell and NYS CDD created considerable work and confusion for those with both program implementation and administrative responsibilities. It might have been helpful to minimize confusion about the financial aspects of the grant and to get counties to participate in key events and demonstrate that they were doing work consistent with promising and best practices, if they had been contracted as vendors rather than subgrantees. As vendors, they would have been paid based on achieving agreed-upon outcomes, which would have required participation and specific deliverables. In some ways, it was necessary to give CoP participants more choice than seemed ideal because as subgrantees they were required to find allowable ways to spend their funds each year, rather than having funding tied to their CoP engagement or "milestone" payments. Consequently, they did not have a strong incentive to prioritize some CoP work.

Main Takeaways

Regarding training and supporting participating counties:

- Find ways for participants to engage with and get to know each other early on
- Use an outcomes- and participation-based payment structure
- Allow participants choice within parameters until they have a clear sense of the goals and values of the grant
- Require all participants to have some common elements in their program design, to learn different ways that tasks might be completed given county-specific needs and resources
- Meaningfully include "experts by experience" - youth, family members, and others who have been directly impacted by systems involvement - as trainers, content developers, mentors, advisors, etc.

"Don't give up. If you have an idea and you know it's a good idea, keep looking for like-minded people who understand the value of these projects. You will find them. Don't give up on the kids after the first time."
~ Amy Secor, Warren County

Next Steps

Cornell's Yang-Tan Institute is retooling the Y-ReCONNECTS website to be inclusive of all current and future projects related to youth and young adults with disabilities impacted by juvenile justice and other systems. We are awaiting word on multiple grant applications and actively pursuing other opportunities. We anticipate partnering with Tioga, Warren, and/or Washington County, as we build on the Y-ReCONNECTS initiative by engaging with more counties across NYS in effective cross-systems collaboration. Some of the current and proposed projects are designed for national impact.

Tioga, Warren, and Washington will continue and extend the work begun under the CDD grant, using existing funding. They have also been exploring other sources of funding.

Emerging Needs

The need for improved communication and collaboration within and across systems was evident throughout the grant cycle. There are many different initiatives and programs targeted to justice involved youth; however, there is no central place to learn of these resources. Due to lack of awareness and/or territoriality, information sharing across programs is limited. Existing programs (and court personnel) rarely consider the specific needs of people with intellectual disabilities. Most stakeholders we encountered were more familiar with and seeking assistance with youth with mental health disabilities. Service providers need more guidance and support for: effectively engaging youth and families as partners, creating genuinely collaborative work groups, and implementing trauma-informed approaches into daily practice.

Areas for Growth

Ideally, we would have established robust partnerships with youth-serving agencies and community groups to engage youth as content creators, trainers, and mentors. Their perspectives and experiences are key to positive systems transformation, and it would have been helpful to provide the county teams with examples of how to effectively engage youth in their CoP work. We invited four agencies/groups who have access to youth and others with I/DD to be compensated partners. Not all accepted the invitation, and those that did were not able to contribute as much to the project as we had hoped.

Sustainability Plan

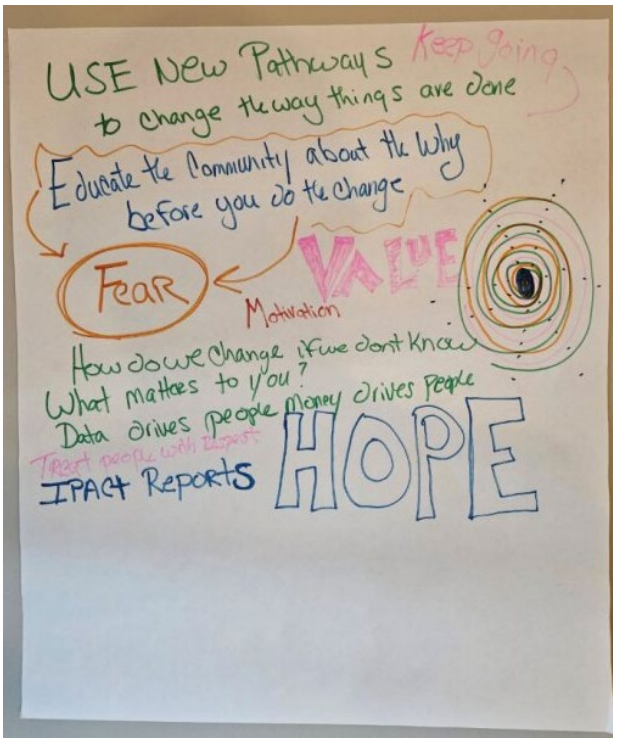
Cornell and the subgrantees are all committed to continuing the work started under the CDD grant and expanding upon it. The work will continue using existing funding, recently awarded funding from other sources, and future funding. The grant writing workshop we hosted provided excellent guidance and resources to aid the counties with these efforts. Cornell and the subgrantees are continuing to build partnerships that will enable the development of robust grant proposals and support the delivery of comprehensive reentry services.

"We are actively seeking additional funding to continue the collaborative efforts. We are also working with the WIB board to expand our capacity to engage additional populations including in-school youth 14 and older."
~Lisa Weston-Bialy, Tioga County

"All the programs created will continue…as they have proven to be effective and valuable in the community."
~ Amy Secor, Warren County

"Our agency and partners will continue to provide reentry services for our youth in Washington County. All services that have been put in place will be continued at this time utilizing various local and state funding streams."
~ Shaun Etu, Washington County

CONCLUSION



The Y-ReCONNECTS project was a worthwhile endeavor. Over the course of the grant, three counties received intensive training and technical assistance, and many more communities were impacted through a multitude of learning opportunities. The subgrantees are excited about what they have been able to accomplish and are looking forward to continuing to implement promising and best practices, evident in the mission of the Y-ReCONNECT CoP, to expand on this work. Together we learned the power in "doing things differently, and doing different things", to support improved outcomes for system-involved youth with I/DD and other disabilities.

"You didn't just create a community of practice for our counties. Other people benefitted, too. You created a community of practice for the whole state of New York!"

~ Lisa Weston-Bialy, Tioga County