CYPM Spotlight Report:
Harris County Youth Collective

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Introduction

The Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR) developed the Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM or “Model”) in 2010. The CYPM is an integrated framework for providing collaborative multidisciplinary services to youth involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (i.e., “crossover” or “dual status” youth). Child welfare, family courts, juvenile justice, and other youth-serving systems implement this research-based Model to improve system processing and youth outcomes. The CYPM encourages strength-based approaches, cross-system collaboration, and transparency to support youth. Since 2010, more than 100 communities nationwide have implemented the CYPM. In Texas, CJJR has supported Model implementation in five counties (i.e., Bexar, Dallas, McLennan, Tarrant and Travis counties). Most recently, CJJR has worked with stakeholders in Harris County to incorporate the principles and values of the Model into its Dual Status Youth Initiative.

Harris County began its engagement with CJJR through a partnership with FSG, a collective impact-focused consulting group hired to design and structure the Harris County Dual Status Youth Initiative. As a result of three intersecting interests, Harris County decided to implement the Crossover Youth Practice Model. First, local leaders across juvenile justice, child protective services and community organizations working with system involved youth pushed to focus on better coordination and communication across agencies in Harris County. Second, the Houston Endowment, a private philanthropic foundation, wanted to support targeted change for the crossover population in Harris County. Finally, FSG recognized potential partnerships with Texas communities that had already implemented the Model. Since the beginning of this systems change effort, Harris County has worked diligently to elevate youth voice and active youth engagement, culminating in the creation of the Harris County Youth Collective (HCYC). The HCYC prioritized youth engagement as they designed infrastructure and practice improvement work. This paper highlights Harris County’s creation of a successful, unique youth-adult partnership strategy that utilizes youth voice and experience to effectively shape practice.

Harris County Youth Collective

Harris County, Texas is the most populous county in the state, home to over four million residents concentrated primarily in the city of Houston. The HCYC began as the Dual Status Task Force, a group of practitioners who worked within systems that support dual status youth. The Task Force aimed to build a cross-sector, community-led effort that connected systems and services to improve dual status youth outcomes. The Task Force focused particularly on youth dually involved in the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department (HCJPD). As the Task Force gained momentum, the initiative evolved from a small
group to a countywide program, and then ultimately to the HCYC, which now employs a full-time staff. Throughout this evolution, organizers integrated and prioritized voices of those with lived experience.¹

Prior to hiring full-time staff, the Steering Committee, which had been formed to lead the HCYC, agreed on a vision:

“All dually-involved youth can thrive in the areas of wellness, education, and transition to adulthood. In support of this vision, we aim to create an aligned and data-driven system that is inclusive of families and caregivers, committed to equity, and responsive to youths’ individualized needs.”

Members of the Steering Committee knew that creating transformative solutions would require their plans to be informed by the experiences and perspectives of individuals with histories of system involvement. This paper will review the HCYC’s successes and challenges to effectively engage youth in system design and feedback without promoting tokenism² or transactionalism.³

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**Research and Current Best Practices on Family and Youth Engagement**

Family engagement is essential for youth-serving systems, as it promotes more supportive environments for both youth and their families. Youth and families must be involved in treatment, planning, and placement decisions to achieve improved and

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¹ Lived experience, a qualitative research term, refers to the real choices, decisions, and behaviors of a subject rather than conceptual or theoretical preferences.
² Tokenism is the act of making only a perfunctory effort or symbolic gesture rather than promoting true inclusion or representation of a particular group.
³ Transactionalism is the phenomenon of engaging youth to provide a service (e.g. serve on a board, be present at a meeting, provide examples of lived experience) without providing long term support or building lasting healthy relationships.
sustainable youth outcomes (Shanahan & diZerega, 2015; Pennell, Shapiro, & Spigner, 2011; Council of State Governments, 2019).

For crossover youth, active engagement is especially important. Oftentimes, crossover youth face a more complicated set of challenges, including maltreatment at home, lack of education and placement stability, limited connections to positive role models, and repeated negative interactions with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems (Herz, et al., 2009). Further, the number of agency workers with whom crossover youth and their families interact can cause resentment toward child-serving systems, especially if trust is lacking and direct communication lines are not open.

Leaders of both systems agree that family engagement is valuable, and recently, federal agencies like the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and local leaders have encouraged the use of an expanded definition of “family” beyond parents and siblings to include extended family members, caregivers, and community mentors. This is in line with the important principle that youth should be able to define their own “family” (Shanahan & diZerega, 2015; Council of State Governments, 2019). From creating peer support systems for family members and enhancing education on system navigation and expectations to encouraging visits and active participation in meetings, many jurisdictions nationwide are emerging as engagement leaders (Council of State Governments, 2019). The most promising new programs promote “family centered justice.” For instance, Pennsylvania’s Family Involvement Committee developed a Parent Resource Guide and oversees engagement efforts in the probation system (McCartin, 2016). Similarly, Illinois’ Action Network created digestible resources to help

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**Importance of Youth and Family Engagement in the CYPM**

CYPM foundational principles guide all practices, policies, programs, and supports created within the context of the Model. Particularly important is the tenet that youth and families have strengths and should be treated as unique individuals. Those strengths should be reflected in system processes and used to create true equitable partnerships, both on the individual and system levels. Aligned with this tenet is **Youth and Family Engagement**, one of seven themes of the Model.

The CYPM recognizes the need to engage families by building good working relationships to meet individualized goals for families and their children. The Model supports a strength-based approach to case management that is family-focused and actively engages youth and their families in all aspects of the decision-making process. Youth and Family Engagement is not limited to case management but also directs the system infrastructure development process.
youth and families understand system processes and their rights (National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, 2012, 4).

While increased family engagement has become a more visible goal on the national stage, equal importance should be placed on youth engagement and collaboration. Youth are the experts of their own experiences, and they are invaluable resources in determining steps for their own healthy futures. In a recent study completed by researchers at the University of Nebraska Omaha, caseworkers and advocates were able to paint a better “whole picture” of the youth’s situation when youth themselves were involved in key decision-making meetings (Wright, Spohn, & Chenane, 2017, 16). Further, when youth were included in discussions from the beginning of system involvement, they were empowered to shed light on situations that may not have been uncovered otherwise. This increased information sharing built mutual trust between caseworkers, youth, and youths’ families. This led to “reductions in duplications of services across systems, and more often resulted in outcomes such as diversion” (Wright Spohn, & Chenane, 2017, 17).

Effectively communicating with youth also means understanding their lived experience and individual backgrounds. Learning to communicate with youth in language they understand and can relate to is essential, especially for those youth who are in care or have had residential treatment experience. Ensuring that system staff and partners are culturally and linguistically competent is an especially important strategy for promoting youth engagement (Building Bridges Initiative, 2015, 5-6; Youth Move International, 2019). Attention to language can result in increased trust and more appropriate decision-making. In addition, youth should be comfortable speaking freely without threat of punishment. This is best achieved when staff actively seek to understand youth perspectives, practice patience and understanding, and allow youth to drive conversations (Building Bridges Initiative, 2012, 3). Crossover youth may have had traumatic experiences at home; providing a safe sharing place within the juvenile justice and child welfare systems is important and leads to improved outcomes.

Equally critical is youth engagement at the community level. For system-involved youth who have transitioned, or are in the process of transitioning out of system care, inclusive communities can provide meaningful opportunities to inform and shape policies that affect them. Community support can improve not only youth outcomes, but community outcomes as well. Researchers at Portland State University note that, “Importantly, when adult stakeholders invest in processes that promote youth voice in such organizations, youth engagement in organizational activities can increase and individual young people can accrue relational and developmental benefits from participation itself” (Walker, et al., 2018, 2). Additionally, studies have shown that community wraparound services for crossover youth that include ways to “increase young people’s satisfaction, active engagement and self-determined participation” increase youth engagement and productivity significantly (Walker, Seibel, & Jackson, 2017, 1). Enhanced youth engagement increases youth “self-determination while also
maintaining connectedness with parents and other adults in their lives” (Walker, et al., 2018, 12). That said, it can be difficult to adequately incorporate youth into meaningful positions of organizational power. Though the practice of youth engagement is becoming more widespread, organizations must be sure to “build awareness, secure resources, and maintain commitment for a range of approaches to include youth in decision-making.” This can include writing in requirements for youth input on contracts, decision processes, and implementation steps (Walker, et al., 2018, 3).

Increasingly, youth advisory councils and other peer-to-peer mentoring efforts have become effective vehicles for youth engagement. Youth advisory councils provide space for youth to be involved in system and community decision-making, and peers with similar experiences can often encourage and support positive interactions. For example, Colorado implemented a youth feedback program that pairs youth involved in the foster care system with “Adolescent Specialists” — full-time state workers who note and advocate for their youth partners’ ideas, transport youth to regional youth panels, and collaborate with other pairs in youth focus groups across the state (Gothro & Caplan, 2018, 3-4). Throughout the country, jurisdictions are turning to youth with lived experience to help build sustainable and impactful programs in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

The CYPM guided the HCYC’s development, and youth and family collaboration plays a key role in program operation and success.

The HCYC’s first Youth Advisory Board meeting
Youth Advisory Board Development and Implementation

The original design of the HCYC Steering Committee included two positions for young adults (aged 18 - 26) who had lived experience as dual status youth. These positions were structured with the Collective Impact Model in mind, through which youth-serving agencies affiliated with the Steering Committee would sponsor part-time employment for the young adults.

Creating the Young Adult Fellowship

Members of the HCYC Steering Committee and local experts on youth collaboration and engagement understood the need to develop the Young Adult Fellowship, to be made up of youth Fellows from the community with dual status experience. The intent of the design was threefold:

1. Deeply integrate youth and young adult input into the strategies and decision-making of the initiative.

2. Incorporate perspectives from a diverse set of dual status experiences beyond those of the Fellows through a broader youth outreach strategy.

3. Provide leadership development and skill-building opportunities for the Fellows that can serve them well after completing the Fellowship.

4 The Collective Impact Model is a framework that structures social change. It encourages community involvement, open communication and relationships, and well-defined measurement strategies. See more at https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/what-collective-impact.
Once selected, the Fellows would work directly with the HCYC staff members to create a broader outreach strategy and prepare to serve on the Steering Committee. The Fellows would also receive employment and career coaching through two partner organizations. These organizations were selected specifically because of their long histories of working with and for system-involved youth and their commitment to positive youth development.

Soon after launching the Young Adult Fellowship, the HCYC faced challenges in the design. While the original structure aimed to empower and provide skill-building opportunities for youth, it quickly became clear that there was not enough support for young adults to thrive, nor was the Fellowship truly inclusive of youth voice. For example, one youth had a legal conflict of interest deeming her ineligible to participate, and another had a criminal history that barred him from working with the partner organizations. While there was an understanding that justice and child protection involvement was a part of the lives of participants, the partners’ organizational structures, including their contracting supporters and internal policies, posed a barrier to this initial strategy. To address this challenge, the HCYC staff moved to a temporary employee model with a locally recognized staffing agency that provided opportunities to working age adults with backgrounds that pose barriers in employment settings. Career coaches from the original organizational partners remained active, but it was difficult to coordinate a shared strategy among the various groups.

Additionally, the program hoped to tap into Fellows’ personal community networks and other youth-serving organizations to identify a broader youth outreach strategy. While they achieved some engagement, the youths’ personal networks were not as broad as the design committee had assumed. Finally, because the HCYC was not a direct service provider, there was no blueprint to effectively integrate youth voice. The HCYC staff had limited experience working with young adults and struggled to support the Fellows in a manner that truly provided growth and valuable experience.

**Young Adult Fellowship Becomes Youth Advisory Board**

After supporting four Fellows in the initial Young Adult Fellowship over twelve months, it was clear that the original program design was ineffective and unscalable. Therefore, the HCYC staff designed a full-time program manager position to lead recruiting, management, and sustainability for the Young Adult Fellowship. The HCYC hired Dieter Cantu for the role, as he was uniquely qualified with strong connections to local communities, a commitment to juvenile justice reform, and his own lived experience in both the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Cantu could truly connect in communities and with youth and young adults, and he also had the creative capacity to develop a program unique to the needs of the HCYC. In creating this role, the HCYC strove to amplify youth voices and collaborate on strategies for systems change, but also to develop a new group of young leaders by supporting their personal and
professional growth. With Cantu on board, the HCYC officially launched the Youth Advisory Board (YAB) to replace the Young Adult Fellowship.

When initially building the YAB, the HCYC came to an agreement with members of the Steering Committee to recruit young adults who had dual status involvement and had aged out of service eligibility. After attempting to fill YAB positions using these specific recruitment criteria, the HCYC quickly learned that there were fewer formerly dual status youth connected to existing partners’ programming than anticipated. Changing tactics, Cantu began to build the YAB person-by-person by contacting instructors from the Houston Independent School District and recruiting youth with whom he was once incarcerated at the Texas Youth Commission.\(^5\) The HCYC staff encouraged youth who had attended prior events to join the YAB as well. Five months after launching the YAB, the HCYC began to build a parallel Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), consisting of dual status youth under the age of 18 housed in local Residential Treatment Centers (RTC). The purpose of the YAC will be to both connect with youth currently in the systems to reflect their ongoing experiences, as well as to begin building a base for future YAB members to continue to participate once they age out of care.

The HCYC’s vision for the Youth Advisory Board, as was with the Fellowship, is to integrate the voices of dually involved youth into its strategies and decision-making processes, provide leadership and skill-building opportunities for its members, and encourage a broader outreach strategy to incorporate diverse youth perspectives.

\(^5\) Texas Youth Commission, the predecessor agency to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, operated the state’s juvenile correctional facilities at the time of Cantu’s system involvement.
Current YAB members actively participate in the HCYC Steering Committee and rigorously prepare for monthly meetings by reading and producing materials. Participants engage in a broad range of educational sessions, including informational panels on the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, professional development training, and leadership skills training. Along with supporting outreach to other youth with dual status experience, YAB members help develop engagement strategies to coordinate with existing local youth groups and councils. Board members also help manage logistics and facilitate focus groups and brainstorming sessions; gather input on digital platforms; communicate and collaborate with community youth; and collect, synthesize, and disseminate findings from outreach sessions for meetings and presentations for the Initiative and broader community.
HCYC Vision for the Future

Because dual status youth experience higher rates of adversity and complex trauma than other system-involved youth, the HCYC takes particular care in making systems more approachable. The HCYC seeks to bridge the gaps between the public sector, service providers, and courts. In facilitating such connections, the HCYC is governed by the principle of equity; it is important that everyone shares responsibilities and aligns resources to connecting the community with youth serving agencies. In this spirit, the HCYC is educating and encouraging community members to participate in policy change and specifically focus on youth-serving systems. The Collective collaborates rather than making demands; they craft their messages to support community and youth voices and uncover barriers in the community and systems preventing dually involved youth from achieving positive outcomes.

The HCYC takes the future of the YAB very seriously, and its members make a special effort to remove any notion of tokenism and transactionalism, which organizations may unintentionally imply or encourage when working with those with lived experience. The HCYC takes care to treat members with respect and support their individual needs. Members are not forced to “make appearances” by attending all events or meetings unless they feel prepared and comfortable doing so, nor are they compelled to speak at Steering Committee meetings or asked to repeat their stories for partners, public advertising, or marketing.

YAB members initially received monthly stipends for participation, but the program has moved to a part-time employment model, which provides more sustainable income to members. This change was necessary due to increased demand on members’ time to speak at events on behalf of the HCYC. In partnership with core staff, YAB members debrief after meetings to reflect on the discussions, creating a mechanism for feedback. The HCYC also provides coaching on professional norms and behavior and outlines individual goals for each YAB member. The HCYC identifies opportunities for peer learning and coaching in the broader community. The YAB coordinates its own meeting times and agenda; each member provides input to enhance engagement.
The HCYC supports YAB members in the context of their positions and provides a membership package. In addition to financial support, each member has access to mental health counseling services, gym membership, transportation reimbursement, and gift cards; court observations and legal representation; and resources for personal needs, including resume building, financial capacity planning, policy training, professional networking, and professional attire. In addition to the membership package, Board members are connected to a larger network of opportunities for advancement in the public and nonprofit sector.

The HCYC created the YAB after overcoming challenges in the initial Fellowship program, and the YAB has since flourished. In crafting and implementing the restructured program, staff and Steering Committee members partner with youth and young adults more effectively. The HCYC has supported the YAB to empower dually involved youth, remove tokenism, and support the community by monitoring and adjusting as the work grows and shifts. Given the commitment of the HCYC, community partners, and the youth Board members, the YAB is well positioned for long-term success.

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**Results**

The HCYC has diligently developed and refined a sustainable youth-oriented program. While the structure of collaborative systems change efforts can often be challenging, the YAB has been a resounding success, as evidenced by a number of examples that follow. In addition, the HCYC is in the process of completing a more rigorous quantitative assessment of the initiative.

There have been notable improvements in youth participants’ lives. For example, through the YAB, youth have reconnected to family, accessed medical and therapeutic care, and received important documents, like driver’s licenses, birth certificates, and financial documentation. In addition, the YAB facilitates pro-social connections with peers and community mentors, better decision-making, increased responsibility, growing professionalism, and positive well-being.

The skills youth cultivate through the YAB help them in their future careers as well. Youth learn data entry and analysis, public speaking, policy and advocacy processes,
social media management, interview strategies, and grassroots organizing. Through meaningful career training and work experience, YAB members are poised to be productive and successful community members.

Additionally, youth on the YAB have participated in a number of speaking engagements and presentations. In Harris County, YAB members have met with newly elected judges, trained DFPS staff on family and youth engagement, and interfaced with the District Attorney on existing diversion programs and potential system improvements. More broadly, the YAB has gone to the Texas State Capitol in Austin to advocate for policies to state legislators. Members are regularly invited to participate in community events and will be presenting their work at the Fall 2019 True Colors United Conference in Washington, DC. YAB members have incredible opportunities to go beyond telling their stories and drive change that will impact their peers as well as professionals working to support system-involved youth.

The HCYC Steering Committee, which developed the original Fellowship program and the YAB, has grown significantly through working with youth. The Committee, made up of local leaders, has shifted their thinking to become more inclusive. They now strive to lift up youth voice and engage with youth in new ways. The Steering Committee and other system staff are committed to creating genuine partnerships with youth with lived system experience.

Even with this progress, HCYC staff, the Steering Committee, and the YAB continue to navigate entrenched systems and are leading a paradigm shift to increase youth collaboration and empowerment. The HCYC is rethinking how leadership understands and encourages youth voice to achieve structural systems change. The HCYC acknowledges that although opportunities exist to further create meaningful connections with youth currently involved in the juvenile justice and child protective systems, they are often confronted with concerns around confidentiality and protection. Additional vehicles are needed to elevate the voices of youth—a gap that the HCYC is addressing through the development of the Youth Advisory Committee and the establishment of relationships with residential treatment centers in Harris County.
HCYC staff and the Steering Committee have made mistakes along the way, but the YAB’s success is built on a foundation of flexibility and learning through iteration. As one of few organizations in Harris County promoting youth voice in this way, the HCYC is charting the course in hopes of becoming a model organization to reimagine what improving outcomes for youth, families and communities can look like. While much work remains, the HCYC is committed to connecting and collaborating with youth to educate and improve existing systems.

Conclusion

The Harris County Youth Collective is an important example of successful youth engagement. Its Youth Advisory Board was built on principles of equity, fairness, and giving voice to those with lived experiences. As with the CYPM, the HCYC’s Youth Advisory Board avoids tokenism and actively engages youth voices to build sustainable and effective systems. As the HCYC continues to build the Youth Advisory Board’s capacity as well as their own, they become a strong example for other jurisdictions to develop meaningful youth collaboration throughout their own juvenile justice and child welfare systems.
Resources


