

# TUNNELS & CLIFFS

A Guide for Workforce Development  
Practitioners and Policymakers Serving  
Youth with Mental Health Needs



National Collaborative on  
Workforce & Disability for Youth  
Institute for Educational Leadership



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# Table of Contents

## *Tunnels and Cliffs*

|                             |    |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Acknowledgements .....      | iv |
| Purpose of This Guide ..... | v  |

### Chapter One – **1** The Mental Health Landscape

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Purpose .....   | 1-1 |
| Table 1.1 – Facts and Statistics for Youth with Mental Health Needs .....     | 1-2 |
| Terminology .....   | 1-2 |
| Table 1.2 – Definition of Emotional Disturbance .....                         | 1-3 |
| Mental Health and Special Education: Contrasting Identification Systems ..... | 1-3 |
| Common Mental Health or Emotional Disorders in Youth .....                    | 1-4 |
| Exhibit 1.1 – Supporting Research .....                                       | 1-6 |

### Chapter 2 – **2** A System of Tunnels and Cliffs

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Purpose .....  | 2-1 |
| Table 2.1 – Service Tunnels .....  | 2-2 |
| Table 2.2 – An Ideal Scenario for a Youth’s Initial Point of Entry into Mental Health Services ..... | 2-3 |
| Treatment Interventions .....  | 2-3 |
| The Transition Cliff .....   | 2-5 |
| Table 2.3 – The Transition Cliff for Youth with Disabilities .....                                   | 2-5 |
| Exhibit 2.1 – Supporting Research .....  | 2-8 |

## Chapter 3 – Implications for Practice

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Purpose .....   | 3-1  |
| The <i>Guideposts for Success</i> .....   | 3-1  |
| Table 3.1 – The <i>Guideposts for Success for Youth with Mental Health Needs</i> .....  | 3-3  |
| Table 3.2 – National Consensus Statement on Mental Health Recovery .....  | 3-8  |
| Table 3.3 – Guidelines for Youth Service Practitioners .....  | 3-10 |
| When a Youth Enters a Workforce Development Program .....   | 3-11 |
| Determining Whether a Youth has a Mental Health Need .....  | 3-13 |
| Table 3.4 – Signs of Potential Mental Illness in Adolescents .....  | 3-13 |
| Table 3.5 – Mental Health Screens vs. Evaluations .....   | 3-14 |
| Table 3.6 – Columbia University TeenScreen Program Tools .....  | 3-15 |
| Culturally and Linguistically Competent Practices .....   | 3-16 |
| Transition Strategies for Youth with MHN .....  | 3-16 |
| Table 3.7 – Accommodating Youth with MHN .....  | 3-17 |
| Supported Education and Supported Employment .....  | 3-18 |
| Promising and Effective Practices .....   | 3-19 |
| Table 3.8 – Pro-Bank Promising Transition Programs Serving Youth with MHN .....   | 3-19 |
| Table 3.9 – Promising Mental Health Programs Serving Transition-Age Youth .....   | 3-25 |
| Exhibit 3.1 – Supporting Research .....   | 3-26 |
| Exhibit 3.2 – Framework for Active Youth Involvement .....  | 3-28 |
| Exhibit 3.3 – Sample Release of Records Form .....  | 3-32 |
| Exhibit 3.4 – Compiling Personal Transition Data .....  | 3-33 |
| Exhibit 3.5 – Materials from <i>Vocational and Transition Services for Adolescents with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: Strategies and Best Practices</i> ..... | 3-38 |
| Exhibit 3.5.A – Employer Profile .....  | 3-39 |
| Exhibit 3.5.B – Vocational Phase System .....   | 3-40 |
| Exhibit 3.5.C – Informal Behavior Management System .....   | 3-42 |

## Chapter 4 – Implications for Policy

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Purpose .....   | 4-1 |
| The Policy Challenge .....  | 4-1 |
| Components of Effective Transition Systems for Youth with MHN ..... | 4-3 |
| The Beginning Road Map to Establish a Systemic Foundation .....     | 4-3 |
| The Center of Gravity – The States .....                            | 4-4 |
| Critical Design Elements .....                                      | 4-5 |
| Universal Access .....  | 4-5 |
| Table 4.1 – Principles of Universal Design .....                    | 4-5 |
| Competitive Employment .....  | 4-5 |
| The Importance of Youth Leadership .....                            | 4-6 |
| Family Involvement and Support .....                                | 4-7 |
| Caring Adults .....   | 4-7 |
| Critical Process Design Features .....                              | 4-7 |
| Interagency Coordination and Collaboration .....                    | 4-7 |
| Table 4.2 – Memoranda of Understanding Components .....             | 4-9 |

|  |      |
|--|------|
| Table 4.3 – Roles and Responsibilities by Organizational Level .....                         | 4-10 |
| Resource Management .....  | 4-10 |
| Cultural and Linguistic Competence to Address Institutional Bias .....                       | 4-13 |
| Professional Preparation and Development of Youth Service Professionals .....                | 4-14 |
| Conclusion .....   | 4-15 |
| Exhibit 4.1 – Supporting Research .....  | 4-16 |
| Exhibit 4.2 – Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) .....                        | 4-19 |
| Exhibit 4.3 – Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) Privacy Rule ..... | 4-20 |
| Exhibit 4.4 – Sample Inter-agency Data-sharing Agreement .....                               | 4-21 |

## Appendix A – Resources

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Mental Health and Disability .....                            | A-2 |
| School-based Preparatory Experiences .....                    | A-3 |
| Employment and Career Preparation .....                       | A-4 |
| Youth Development and Leadership .....                        | A-6 |
| Connecting Activities (Individual and Support Services) ..... | A-7 |
| Family Involvement and Support .....                          | A-8 |
| Policy and Systems Change .....                               | A-9 |

## Appendix B – Chapter References

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Chapter 1 .....                                    | B-1 |
| Exhibit 1.1 – Supporting Research References ..... | B-2 |
| Chapter 2 .....                                    | B-4 |
| Exhibit 2.1 – Supporting Research References ..... | B-4 |
| Chapter 3 .....                                    | B-5 |
| Exhibit 3.1 – Supporting Research References ..... | B-5 |
| Chapter 4 .....                                    | B-7 |
| Exhibit 4.1 – Supporting Research References ..... | B-9 |

## Appendix C – Acronyms

|                             |     |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| Appendix C – Acronyms ..... | C-1 |
|-----------------------------|-----|

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# Purpose of This Guide

Ensuring that a young person is healthy and ready for work, independent living, and civic engagement is easier said than done. There is no coordinated system that guides youth through the process of becoming productive and self-sufficient members of society and the labor market. Pieces of the system exist, such as Career and Technical Education, transition planning under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and programs available through Vocational Rehabilitation and the Workforce Investment Act. Unfortunately, however, these services are often incomplete and uncoordinated – and therefore ineffective. Youth with educational and career challenges, such as those with mental health needs, too often fall off one of the cliffs between youth and adult systems or get shunted down an arbitrary or inappropriate service tunnel based on considerations dictated by the system rather than the youth’s wants and needs.

This guide has been developed as part of ODEP’s initiative to help workforce development practitioners, administrators, and policymakers enhance their understanding of youth with mental health needs (MHN) and the supports necessary to help them transition into the workforce successfully. This guide provides practical information and resources for youth service practitioners at local One-Stop Career Centers, Vocational Rehabilitation offices, youth programs funded under the Workforce Investment Act, school transition programs, and mental health agencies. In addition, it provides policy makers, from the program to the state level, with information to help them address system and policy obstacles in order to improve service delivery systems for youth with mental health needs.

Throughout this document, the term “youth with mental health needs” is used to refer to the segment of youth (ages 14 to 25) who have significant mental health needs (emotional, behavioral, or neurobiological disorders) that may or may not have been formally identified or served by the mental health system.

The goals of the guide are to improve the quality of services at the local level, enhance strategic planning at state and local levels, and increase positive results for youth.

For practitioners, the guide will

- provide information concerning the incidence of mental health needs in youth,
- describe core components of mental health services in each state,
- present types of strategies and services that might benefit youth with mental health needs, and
- discuss support services needed for youth with mental health needs entering the workforce.

For administrators and policymakers, the guide will provide

- helpful information on developing practical and effective policies,
- suggestions for creating greater collaboration among programs, and
- strategies for developing an improved interagency transition system for youth, including those with mental health needs.

The guide’s contextual framework is the *Guideposts for Success*, a document developed by NCWD/Youth in collaboration with ODEP. The *Guideposts* are research-based and describe components that all youth need to transition successfully to adulthood as well as modifications for youth with disabilities. The *Guideposts for Success for Youth with Mental Health Needs* incorporate all of the elements of the original *Guideposts* as well as additional specific needs relating to youth with mental health needs.

**Chapter 1** describes the mental health landscape encountered by youth, including facts, statistics, and the conflicting and confusing terminology used to describe mental health needs and conditions.

**Chapter 2** describes the transition cliff that separates youth and adult service systems and the service tunnels that youth with mental health needs must negotiate to access the assistance and support needed to maximize independence.

**Chapter 3** introduces the *Guideposts for Success for Youth with Mental Health Needs* and discusses career preparation, resources, and other issues of concern to youth service practitioners serving youth with MHN.

**Chapter 4** discusses policy issues related to serving youth with MHN and suggests actions for program administrators and state and local policymakers.

**Exhibit 1** in each chapter is a research summary supporting the chapter's content and is provided for the convenience of readers. Some information may be repeated in both the chapters and these exhibits.

**Appendix A** contains a list of web-based resources in the following categories: mental health and disability, school-based preparatory experiences, employment and career preparation, youth development and leadership, connecting activities (activities that connect youth with MHN to individual and support services), family involvement and support, and policy and systems change.

**Appendix B** contains the references cited in each chapter and in each chapter's supporting research exhibit.

**Appendix C** contains a list of acronyms used in this guide.