

Youth Development and Leadership Opportunities to Develop Thriving Competencies: An Innovative Strategies Practice Brief

This Innovative Strategies Practice Brief provides practical examples from promising and exemplary youth programs for implementing youth development and leadership opportunities that help youth develop Thriving competencies. Some of the youth programs featured in this brief have been recognized by NCWD/Youth as [Innovative Strategies](#). NCWD/Youth Innovative Strategies feature programs and organizations that serve youth with disabilities either as a target population or as part of other youth populations.

Defining Youth Development and Leadership

The terms “youth development” and “youth leadership” are often used interchangeably even though they refer to distinctly different but related concepts. For this reason it is important to clearly define the two concepts before looking at how programs and organizations can put them into practice. *Youth development* is a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences that help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models that focus solely on youth problems. NCWD/Youth adapted this definition from research conducted by National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) and the National Collaboration for Youth (NYC).

Youth leadership is a part of the youth development process and concerns the ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence the opinion and behavior of other people, and show the way by going in advance (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). Youth leadership is also the ability to analyze one’s own strengths and weaknesses, set personal and vocational goals, and have the self-esteem to carry them out. It includes building skills to identify community resources and use them, not only to live independently, but also to establish support networks to participate in community life and to effect positive social change (Adolescent Employment Readiness Center, Children’s Hospital, n.d.).

Studies indicate that participating in youth development programs and activities increases youth outcomes, including increasing positive attitudes and behaviors (e.g. motivation, academic performance, self-esteem,

problem-solving, positive health decisions, and interpersonal skills) and reduces negative behaviors (e.g. alcohol and tobacco use and violence). Participation in leadership development experiences is linked to increased self-efficacy and the development of skills relevant to success in adulthood and the workplace such as decision-making and working well with others. Building self-advocacy and self-determination skills, an important aspect of leadership development for youth with disabilities, correlates with making a successful transition to adulthood. See [Youth Development and Leadership: A White Paper](#) for a fuller description of research findings on youth development and youth leadership.

Youth Development and Leadership (YD/L) in Practice

Strategies for implementing youth development and leadership in programs can be organized according to five broad youth development competency areas: Connecting, Thriving, Leading, Working, and Learning. Based upon a framework of youth development created by the Forum for Youth Investment (Ferber, Pittman, & Marshall, 2002), each of these five competency areas are explained in NCWD/Youth’s [Digging Deeper: The Five Areas of Youth Development & Leadership; Youth Development and Leadership in Programs](#); and [Youth Development and Leadership: A White Paper](#). These documents also provide information on how organizations can develop and implement youth development and leadership program strategies to help youth achieve outcomes in all five competency areas.

This Innovative Strategies Practice Brief highlights practical strategies for helping youth develop competencies in one of the competency areas - *Thriving*.



Strategies for Developing Thriving Competencies

Thriving is the youth development competency area that involves developing attitudes, skills, and behaviors that youth need to maintain their optimal physical and emotional well-being. The strategies described in this brief focus primarily on helping youth understand and manage their physical and emotional health needs, and providing opportunities for youth to develop skills and connect to appropriate services to address these needs.

Some of the strategies that programs and organizations use to help youth develop competencies for thriving include:

- Providing or Connecting Youth to Mental and Physical Health Services
- Helping Youth Develop Knowledge and Skills for Health-Related Decision Making and Management
- Offering Benefits Planning and Counseling to Youth and Families

Examples of how youth programs and organizations implement each of these strategies are described below.

Providing or Connecting Youth to Mental and Physical Health Services

[YouthSource](#) is a youth center operated by the WorkSource Renton One-Stop Career Center in King County, Washington. As a part of the King County Department of Community and Human Services' Work Training Programs, YouthSource offers a full array of programs for young adults, ages 16-21, who have dropped out of high school. While YouthSource's primary services are employment, education, and leadership development, the center also provides comprehensive case management to connect youth to other community-based services they may need. Youth often need assistance accessing health and mental health services. One way YouthSource addresses this need is through its partnership with the [Ruth Dykeman Children's Center](#).

With funding from King County's Department of Community and Human Services, Mental Health, Chemical Abuse and Dependency Services Division, the Ruth Dykeman Children's Center provides YouthSource with a full-time counselor who is dually certified in mental health and drug and alcohol counseling. The counselor offers a complete menu of counseling services including assessments, referrals, support

groups, crisis intervention, one-on-one therapy, and staff training. YouthSource finds that having mental health counseling staff on-site removes the stigma and other barriers to youth using these services. The youth develop a trusting and caring relationship with the on-site therapist just like they do with any other youth program staff. YouthSource's experience supporting the mental health needs of youth is described in a case study in [Transitioning Youth with Mental Health Needs to Meaningful Employment and Independent Living](#).

[North Central Mental Health Services \(North Central MHS\)](#) in Franklin County, OH, is a comprehensive, not-for-profit, community-based mental health and substance abuse recovery agency that provides short- and long-term services for all age groups. North Central MHS operates the *Transitional Community Treatment Team (TCTT)* for youth ages 14 -22. TCTT provides treatment services for multiple mental health needs, and coordinates involvement with multiple service systems, including mental health, education, child welfare, and juvenile court.

TCTT's mission is to help adolescents and young adults with mental health needs move into adulthood; assist them with recovery and enhance their resiliency; and help them achieve employment, independent living, and stable social relationships and become integrated into the local communities. This transitional program is customized to meet each individual's needs and emphasizes that young people can do well despite facing adversity in their lives. It offers a bridge for youth most in need of assistance by providing a connection between the two large systems of child mental health and adult mental health.

TCTT's design is based on an adaptation of the Program for Assertive Community Treatment (PACT) model, an evidence-based intervention that emphasizes employment as a long-term approach to treatment and recovery. The model includes individualized assessment, employment placement, follow-along services, and reassessment. PACT programming integrates clinical and rehabilitative services within a continuous or assertive community treatment team, such as TCTT. While the original PACT model team was comprised of case managers and nursing staff, the current TCTT interdisciplinary team includes a team leader, case managers, a psychiatrist, therapists, and an outreach nurse.



Helping Youth Develop Knowledge and Skills for Health-Related Decision Making and Management

[Partners for Youth with Disabilities, Inc. \(PYD\)](#) is a Massachusetts-based nonprofit organization that provides mentoring services to youth with disabilities and promotes mentoring nationally through its National Disability Mentoring Council. PYD operates a number of youth programs including the *Making Healthy Connections (MHC)* program. The MHC program encourages healthy behaviors and increases access to healthy food and physical activity opportunities for youth with disabilities in the Greater Boston and Springfield areas of Massachusetts.

MHC includes a series of interactive discussions and recreational activities designed to help adolescents and young adults with disabilities and special health care needs prepare for adult life. MHC works to motivate youth with disabilities, ages 14-22, to understand their health care needs, effectively use community resources to transition to adult health services, and sustain a healthy lifestyle. Two MHC program sites are currently serving over 60 youth with disabilities and their families through ongoing youth and parent groups.

The goals of the MHC program are to enable young people with disabilities and special health care needs to:

- 1) Gain a greater understanding of their disabilities and/or special health care needs through interaction with other young adults and mentors who have disabilities and/or special health care needs;
- 2) Build positive communication skills that will help them to describe and educate others about their disability, leading them to advocate for themselves at home, in school, in health care settings, and in the community;
- 3) Develop strategies for taking more responsibility for activities of daily living, including managing their health care;
- 4) Learn how to access resources in the community to help them prepare for the transition to adulthood;
- 5) Explore healthy lifestyles and recreation options; and
- 6) Increase knowledge about educational, career, and independent living options.

PYD's MHC program is just one example of an initiative designed to prepare youth with disabilities and special health care needs for making decisions and managing their own health care and other aspects of their life as they become adults. The [Healthy and Ready to Work National Resource Center](#) provides guidance, tools, and links to other healthcare transition efforts across the country. For example, the Kentucky Commission on Children with Special Healthcare Needs has developed various resources for youth and families on healthcare

transition including the [Journey to Adulthood - a Transition Travel Guide](#) for youth.

[Sasha Bruce Youthwork](#) in Washington, D.C. is a nonprofit organization that serves runaway, homeless, abused, neglected, and at-risk youth. Many of Sasha Bruce Youthwork's programs and services focus on helping youth be physically and mentally healthy. Sasha Bruce Youthwork is one of several youth organizations that operates the [Teen Outreach Program \(TOP\)](#), a national [evidence-based](#) youth development program model. The Teen Outreach Program engages youth in weekly activities that promote healthy behaviors, develop life skills, and provide youth with a sense of purpose through service learning. TOP operates like a club in which youth meet as a peer group with a trained adult who facilitates the program curricula every week. The weekly activities include learning about adolescent development and sexual health topics including healthy relationship skills, goal setting and decision-making skills, and personal values. The youth also participate in at least 20 hours of community service learning, working together to develop and carry out service projects that address local community needs. Sasha Bruce Youthwork recently started implementing TOP in an effort to reduce teen pregnancy risks and increase civic engagement and academic outcomes among youth attending one of the local high schools it serves.

Offering Benefits Planning and Counseling to Youth and Families

[West Virginia Youth Works](#) (WV Youth Works) is a youth transition demonstration project operated by the [Human Resource Development Foundation \(HRDF\)](#) and funded by the Social Security Administration (SSA). WV Youth Works serves youth, ages 15-25, who receive Social Security disability benefits in 19 counties throughout West Virginia. The demonstration project is designed to increase the employment outcomes of youth with disabilities by providing comprehensive services. These services include person-centered assessment and planning; job search preparation, job development, work experience, job coaching and follow-up support, placement in competitive employment, on-the-job training, family workshops, and benefits planning. Benefits planning and counseling is a critical part of WV Youth Works' services because youth and families need to understand SSA work incentive options and how any income youth earn as they become employed may affect their receipt of disability benefits.

WV Youth Works partners with the West Virginia University Center for Excellence in Disabilities (CED) to provide benefits planning and counseling services.



Youth and families first receive benefits counseling from CED when the youth enrolls in WV Youth Works, and again when youth obtain paid employment or experience any changes in their benefits. WV Youth Works often conducts benefits counseling as a part of the initial program enrollment meetings with youth and their families at their homes. Given the transportation challenges experienced by many youth and families in West Virginia's rural communities, in-person home visits are often a necessity. After the initial benefits counseling meeting, the benefits counselor submits information to the local SSA office through a process call the Benefits Planning Query (BPQY). Next, the benefits counselor prepares a detailed benefits assessment that provides guidance to the family on how paid employment could affect benefits amounts and how to report earnings to SSA to avoid overpayments. Follow-up counseling sessions are often provided by phone to reduce travel expenses for families and counselors. WV Youth Works staff, who provide job development and employment placement services, communicate regularly with the benefits counselor about the youth's employment situation so the counselor can provide additional counseling when needed. Learn more about how CED assists youth and adults with benefits planning and counseling by watching the [CED's 2011 video on Work Incentive Planning and Assistance \(WIPA\)](#).

[California's Bridges to Youth Self-Sufficiency \(Bridges\)](#) is another youth transition demonstration project funded by SSA and the California Department of Rehabilitation (CDOR). From 2003 to 2009, Bridges provided coordinated services and supports to transition-age youth to increase their employment outcomes and improve their quality of life. Through Bridges, youth received person-centered planning, job development and placement, benefits counseling, and intensive service coordination. Operated by CDOR, Bridges partners included the California Department of Education, local school districts, and SSA field offices.

Through strong partnerships with the schools, Bridges benefits counselors often met with youth participants and families at school. At the time of program enrollment, youth and families were invited to an orientation workshop which provided information on SSA work incentives and benefits planning. In addition to group workshops, the benefits counselors met with youth and families for one-on-one counseling sessions. Several [youth success stories on the Bridges website](#) illustrate how benefits planning and counseling helped youth and families make informed decisions during the transition to employment. DORS continues to provide many of the same transition services, including benefits counseling, to youth and families in partnering school

districts throughout California. [California's Disability Benefits 101 website](#) also serves as a useful information source for youth and adults with disabilities. The [Young People and Benefits section](#) provides various tools for both youth and families including the [School and Work calculator](#).

Other Tools and Resources

The following tools and resources may be useful to organizations seeking to implement or strengthen the strategies described in this brief:

Adolescent Health & Wellness

- [Adolescent Health Resources from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention](#)
- [Take Charge of Your Health: A Guide for Teenagers](#), National Institutes of Health

Mental Health

- [Tunnels and Cliffs: A Guide for Workforce Development Professionals and Policymakers serving Youth with Mental Health Needs](#)
- [Helping Youth with Mental Health Needs Avoid Transition Cliffs: Lessons from Pioneering Transition Programs](#)
- [Transitioning Youth with Mental Health Needs to Meaningful Employment and Independent Living](#)
- [Successful Transition Models for Youth with Mental Health Needs: A Guide for Workforce Professionals](#)

Youth Healthcare Transitions

- [Healthy and Ready to Work National Resource Center](#)
- [What Does Health Have to Do with Transition? Everything!](#), National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET)
- [Making the Move to Managing Your Own Personal Assistance Services \(PAS\): A Toolkit for Youth with Disabilities Transitioning to Adulthood](#)

Benefits Planning

- [Disability Benefits 101](#)
- [Benefits Planning for Youths with Disabilities](#)



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The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Practice Brief was written by Mindy Larson. To obtain this publication in an alternate format please contact the Collaborative at 877-871-0744 toll free or email contact@ncwd-youth.info. This Practice Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by the NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at www.ncwd-youth.info. Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications. This document was developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (Number #OD-16519-07-75-4-11). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor. Individuals may produce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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