

Co-designing programs and policies with youth

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SUMMARY

SL Rao, a Foster America fellow with the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and Office of Homeless Youth (OHY), helped to design and facilitate a process by which youth experiencing homelessness helped design recommendations and solutions to prevent housing instability after exit from a public system of care in the state of Washington.

THE OPPORTUNITY

OHY had already been working to elevate youth voice in its work, especially with partners like The Mockingbird Society, a nonprofit organization that partners with young people to transform child welfare and end youth homelessness through youth advocacy and legislative changes. The state legislature requested public systems working with young people to end youth homelessness after exit, an effort that would require coordination and collaboration among multiple stakeholders representing the child welfare, behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems. OHY, along with DCYF, was asked to lead this effort. The team wanted to engage in youth-centered research to identify the root causes driving housing instability for youth to shape the development of holistic recommendations for policy, budget, and program choices.

THE SOLUTION

Build interest in a youth design solution SL built interest and investment in a youth design process through presentations to and engagement of different government agencies, community-based organizations, and individuals that work directly with youth involved in the youth advocacy, foster care, behavioral health, and/or juvenile justice systems.

Design facilitation approach. SL explored different research tools and methods taking special care to consider those that would not re-traumatize youth in the act of sharing their stories or hearing stories similar to their own. For this reason, SL utilized participatory research, a methodology that shifts power from the researcher to the “researched” and focuses on both research AND action.

To ensure that the sessions would be interactive, inclusive, and meaningful, SL engaged two lived experts, young people who have experienced housing instability, to help design and co-facilitate the youth design sessions.

Partner with community organizations to host youth design sessions. After solidifying the facilitation approach and team, SL worked with community organizations located across the state of Washington, ensuring that there was representation of urban, suburban, and rural communities. The community organizations provided meeting space for the sessions and outreach to young people who have had previous public system involvement and experiences of housing instability. The facilitation team also

worked with the community organizations to ensure that there were therapeutic services available on-site during the sessions, in case the activities triggered distress among any of the participants.

Facilitate the sessions. The team tailored their facilitation to each session to meet the needs of the young people in the room, so each session looked different from the next. Most sessions were open to all youth previously or currently experiencing homelessness and public system involvement, with the exception of two sessions that provided a space for youth of color and LGBTQ2 youth to share their experiences and design solutions, among peers with shared identities. Gathering experiences and recommendations from youth of color and LGBTQ2 youth was particularly important because youth of color and LGBTQ2 youth are disproportionately represented in public systems and among youth experiencing housing instability. For example, while Black youth represents only 6 percent of the overall population in the state of Washington, 24 percent of youth experiencing housing instability identify as Black.

Young people were provided \$100 gift cards for their time and expertise. After each session, the facilitation team debriefed the session, identifying which activities and approaches worked and didn't work to improve future sessions.

An example of one session illustrates the importance of offering different types of participation and centering youth stories and experiences.

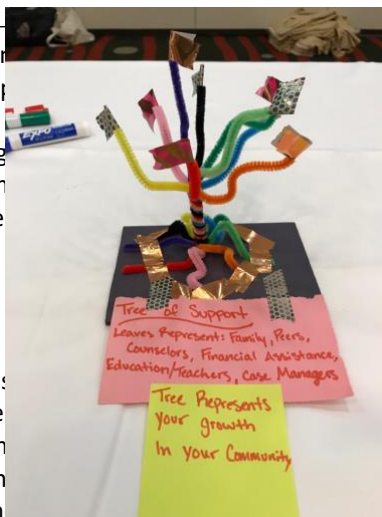
Lunch and set up: Each session had food, and young people were encouraged to engage in creative activities. As young people were eating, the team shared an overview of the session and consent to document photos and quotes during the session. No faces were

Improv exercise: The team opened with exercises from improvisational theater to set a collaborative tone for the session.

Defining the systems: The young people who attended the design sessions were asked to define the three systems that the team was asked to dive into: child welfare, behavioral health, and juvenile justice. Some had intimate familiarity with one or more of the systems; others knew they had interacted with; all had experiences to share. The facilitation team asked participants to share the systems they had interacted with based on their own stories, experiences, and knowledge. The objective of this portion of the session was to create a base understanding of each of the systems.

Identifying the issues: Young people were asked to independently reflect on what they had experienced, heard, and seen during and after their involvement with one or more of the public systems on separate sticky notes. Young people shared stories and comments, while the facilitation team took notes and called out common themes and issues that emerged.

Designing solutions: Once the child welfare, behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems had been defined by the participants, young people were invited to use art supplies to design changes and solutions to challenges they faced during or after their experiences interacting with the child welfare, behavioral health, and/or juvenile justice systems. During this portion of the session, the facilitation team spoke to each participant individually to better understand the solution the young person was designing.



Synthesize and share youth recommendations. The facilitation team and a select number of OHY staff synthesized all of the notes, stories, and solutions to arrive at a set of policy, program, and budget recommendations to address youth homelessness. SL, in partnership with colleagues at OHY and DCYF, developed a report on preventing youth homelessness from public systems of care to the state legislature.

As of June 2020, OHY is working on the implementation of the recommendations that emerged from the design sessions with the help of representatives from DCYF and the Health Care Authority.

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Domestic Violence
Category

Information Club
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Clothing emblem
for social places
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Sleeping
hours

Names
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Names
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The recommendations that emerged from the sessions were published in a report and shared with state policymakers. As a result of these recommendations from youth, OHY received \$1 million to implement a transition living program for youth, the Health Care Authority created and hired a staff member to support youth-centered changes in the behavioral health system, and youth-centered transition planning is a key priority for the foster care and juvenile rehabilitation systems.

- For more information about the Office of Homeless Youth and the population they serve, see the [2016 Progress Report](#) from Washington State Department of Commerce, Office of Homeless Youth
- Read the [full report](#) including youth-designed recommendations for changes to child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health