
Service Providers Connect to Improve Placement Rates

Youth Council: Tulare County Workforce Investment Board Youth Council

Element: Comprehensive Approach

Function: Coordinating Youth Services

Subject: Staff Development, Coordinating Youth Services

The Challenge: Tulare County has three WIA-funded youth agencies, with staff spread out across a rural county the size of Connecticut. County youth job developers were accustomed to meeting for administrative purposes or trainings every few months, but had no ongoing way to connect and share information. Consequently, the county-wide job placement process — both for youth and for employers — was less efficient than it might have been.

The Practice and the Evidence: Youth service providers played a key role in solving this challenge. “One of our premises in the Youth Program is that although some competition among providers is natural, we need to work together to ensure quality services,” says Eldonna Caudill, Senior Analyst with the Tulare County Workforce Investment Department (TCWID). So she was supportive when these service providers approached the Youth Council office with a request: they wanted to meet on a regular basis with all their fellow front-line practitioners in order to share resources, best practices, and job orders. Caudill’s response was, “OK, tell us how you want it to work, what you want to call it, and what you want from us.”

The result was the establishment of monthly meetings called Youth Force, which are built into the calendar and hosted by each of the provider agencies and the TCWID on a rotating basis. Participants readily pass along job orders and recruitment strategies, and the positive response was immediate. “If you walked in, you’d never know that input was coming from different agencies. They were sharing without boundaries because they understand the ‘All Youth-One System’ concept,” comments Caudill. Soon the material shared at the meetings expanded to include information gained at trainings and conferences, strategies, and news about resources and events like job fairs.

At a recent meeting Caudill brought up county performance rates “because our county performance is on target to meet or exceed all measures as a result of the good work they’re doing. It even looks as though we’ll meet the older youth credential rate, which had been lagging like that of many areas nationwide.” Caudill also wanted to reinforce the idea that meeting performance is a collective effort. She readily acknowledges that this success can’t be attributed to the meetings alone, but that’s where she can strategize with practitioners about making performance rates, discuss problem areas, and brainstorm solutions.

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“I have tremendous respect for these folks,” she says. “They’re completely responsible for these Youth Force meetings, and they’re a great idea.”

The Details: Youth Force meetings have been taking place since 2002. Each of the Provider agencies and the TCWID hosts monthly meetings, deciding internally which local office will host. Food is always provided, keeping the tone informal. The meetings are open to all provider staff, but typically only front-line staff attend, and they feel free to ask questions or speak openly if they need help or have a very troubling client. Case workers and job developers share job orders, providing the details and offering to set up the interview for anyone with a qualified candidate.

Over the last couple years, TCWID and Youth Council staff have focused on connecting with other non-WIA partners. Caudill says, “We’ve been working really hard at connecting with foster care youth, and, as a strategy, have invited Independent Living Program (ILP) staff to the Youth Force meeting to share additional information about the ILP program.” Bringing partners and potential partners into to these informal meetings has allowed for more open communication about how to better work together. A focus of their conversations has been about how to best link WIA and foster care. Caudill explains that Youth Force meetings provide an opportunity for participants to discuss “their vision of how we all fit into the big picture [of child welfare services] and how to link services, without duplicating.” In addition, the informal atmosphere has supported youth engagement. Foster youth who are involved in both programs (WIA and ILP) were recently invited to a Youth Force meeting to share their thoughts and experiences of both systems.

Caudill points out that this makes the process more efficient for employers as well, and “opens up the whole landscape beyond the scope of a single agency — which is very different than it was several years ago.” These meetings have helped create a shift in perspective, from viewing youth as the only customer, to understanding that employers are also customers. The county reaps internal benefits as well, because the Youth Force meetings turn the agencies into a single group. For example, knowledgeable staff members take less experienced staff under their wing and essentially provide guidance and advice, whether or not they work at the same agency. “It’s incredible because technically they could be considered competitors, and it grows out of the Youth Force interaction. It opens doors on a personal level in building relationships between service providers - WIA and non-WIA” says Caudill. Another benefit is that direct contact with front-line staff informs administrators about what works and what doesn’t. This allows administration to be more realistic in aligning policy and practice.

Another best practice was created when one agency explored a different format for orientations in order to connect better with disenfranchised, older, out-of-school youth. Instead of starting with an important but slightly boring list of services, staff engage youth in a discussion of what stands between them and what they want, along with possible options for addressing these obstacles. “During the discussion we can slip in the list of services. It has a more natural flow, and it seems to be working because youth are returning to enroll in programs,” Caudill explains.

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The group has shared this effective practice with the other agencies, thus implementing the guiding principle of the Youth Council Institute. Comments Caudill, “There are incredibly talented people out there. The Youth Force meetings allow the practitioners, and we administrators as well, to tap into each other’s ideas efficiently.”

Breakthrough Moment: It only took two Youth Force meetings for Caudill to know that they were going to make a real difference because everyone came in the door with the same goal. Set by practitioners, the agenda focused primarily on sharing job orders, secondarily on sharing resources and best practices, and thirdly on problem-solving across areas. “I knew it was going to work early on,” says Caudill, “because I could see this collective energy focused on ‘how do we best serve our kids?’” The efficacy of the program also struck staff from New Ways to Work in Spring, 2004 when they came to Tulare County to host an Engaging Workplace Partners workshop. When New Ways’ staff wondered why that inevitable sense of interoffice competition was absent, provider staff explained, “We don’t need it. We have Youth Force meetings.”

What’s Next for this YCidea? The Tulare County Youth Council has been sharing Youth Force meetings concept with partner counties at YCi meetings. The program is also evolving to include front-line workers from other agencies that are not WIA funded but want to be connected to it. “You can talk about ‘All Youth-One System’ forever, but you have to build it from the ground up, one piece at a time,” Caudill points out. “These meetings create trust and build relationships, and that’s especially important in bureaucracies. I believe the Youth Force is helping build a more connected youth system and that is an essential component in realizing our vision of “All Youth–One System.”

Tulare County is currently focused on building and leveraging relationships to better connect with child welfare services and support foster youth. They have invited ILP staff to Youth Force meetings to share additional information about the ILP program and provide an introduction for WIA staff about their system and discuss linkages. Again, the informal nature of the Youth Workforce meetings has allowed for better relationship building. In addition, a best practice that came out of these meetings was to create a special orientation monthly after hours for foster youth. As a result of the relationship building, the TCWID has secured an information sharing agreement with DSS to support services for emancipated, out-of-school foster youth.

Where to Go for More information

Tulare County Workforce Investment Board Youth Council

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