

Arizona National Youth in Transition Database: An Innovative Child Welfare Agency and University Collaboration

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The Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS) and Arizona State University (ASU) established a unique partnership to collect federally required National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) survey data from young people in Arizona. Social work students in a Title IV-E program conducted many of the interviews while learning about the needs of young people who are transition-aged and gaining research skills. This article describes the process of developing and implementing the project and provides recommendations for engaging in child welfare agency and university collaborations to meet federal reporting requirements while advancing knowledge about young people in transition.

Project Background

NYTD is a federal reporting system that tracks the services paid for or provided by states to young people who are aging out of foster care through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. Services designed to aid in this transition encompass education, housing, employment, emotional support, and financial management. NYTD also collects outcome data on young people at ages 17, 19, and 21 through a longitudinal survey, which includes federally mandated questions related to demographic information, utilized services, and youth outcomes. While the survey is optional for young people, states are required to invite eligible youth and must achieve minimum participation rates to avoid federal financial penalties.

Arizona has a state-run child welfare system that is administered by DCS. Traditionally, DCS collected NYTD survey data through their DCS Specialists; however, DCS Specialists often have high workloads and do not receive training on conducting research interviews. To improve response rates and lighten staff workload, DCS elected to partner with the ASU Center for Child Well-Being (CCWB). CCWB, housed within the ASU School of Social Work, aims to advance child and family well-being through training, research and evaluation, and community outreach. DCS and CCWB collaborate to design survey protocols,



administer the survey, manage data collection, and report survey outcomes.

CCWB partnered with the ASU Child Welfare Education Program (CWEP) to provide assistance with administering surveys and give student interns meaningful research opportunities. CWEP is a Title IV-E-funded training program that aims to prepare bachelor of social work and master's of social work students for careers in public child welfare. CWEP students receive financial assistance while pursuing their degrees and in return, contractually commit to work for DCS upon graduation. Students are required to complete an internship in a Child Welfare Education Unit, units staffed by ASU employees and embedded in DCS offices. During their internship, students administered NYTD surveys to fulfill the research competency on their internship learning contract.

Development Process

In the spring of 2019, DCS, CCWB, and CWEP began meeting to establish collaborative processes for administering NYTD Baseline surveys to young people turning 17 years old between October 1, 2019, and September 30, 2020. Over multiple meetings, the DCS Office of Continuous Improvement led the development of a process map, a detailed flowchart with key tasks and decision-making points that outlines organizational roles. Partners also developed a safe, secure, and structured process for sharing project data across systems and agreed upon data definitions and non-response options. Once a week, DCS provided CCWB with contact and placement information for young people turning 17 years old within the week. CCWB then assigned interviews to CCWB staff and CWEP students. A research proposal was approved by the ASU Institutional Review Board and DCS Research Review Committee.

Survey Development

The federal NYTD survey contains just 22 questions, but states can add additional questions to learn more about their young people. Taking this as an opportunity to gather additional

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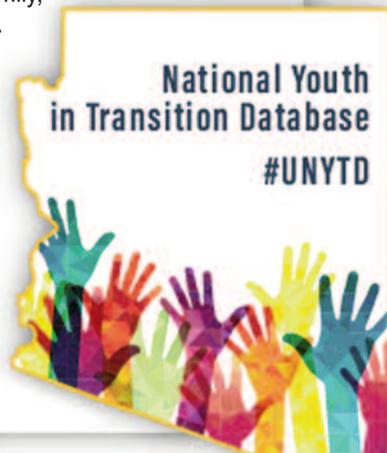
Marketing and Branding Strategy

If NYTD were to be compared to a vehicle, it would be a **van** because it could travel far and transport many youth.



If NYTD were to be compared to a song, the songs chosen would be "**We Are Family**," and "**I Will Survive**," which speak of inclusion, team work, family, and resiliency.

If NYTD were a celebrity, it would be a **TV Talk Show** host and provide a platform for discussing issues.



easily transitioned to phone only. During the phone interviews, interviewers entered survey data into an electronic survey form. Participants received a \$20 gift card, mailed to them by DCS. Based on feedback from young people in foster care that the NYTD survey should be an opportunity to understand unaddressed service needs, a service referral component was added to the end of the survey. Through a conversation with the survey administrator, young people optionally shared any service needs and requested service information from their DCS Specialist. The DCS Statewide Independent Living Coordinator facilitated the identification of resources and supported this referral process.

Interviewer Training

CWEP students participated in a one-day training to prepare to administer surveys. The training was first conducted in person and then transitioned to a live online training via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students learned about the background of NYTD, procedures for contacting young people and obtaining missing contact information, survey protocols, the researcher role, confidentiality and exceptions to confidentiality, and managing research dilemmas. Students engaged in role-play activities to

data, partners compiled a list of potential questions from other surveys of youth and measures of adolescent well-being. Data points were also included to help measure some state strategic plan objectives related to supporting transitions to adulthood. Through an iterative process, partners voted on questions of greatest relevance to DCS and the field of research. In July 2019, the draft questions were printed on large dry erase poster boards for young people in foster care at a DCS Youth Conference to review. Young people wrote on the boards to edit any confusing language, brainstorm new questions, and vote on which survey questions to include. They shared that the questions largely focused on negative outcomes and they wanted a space to talk about positive experiences. From this feedback, two open-ended questions were added to ask young people about things going well in their lives and their future aspirations.

Interview Procedures

To build personal connections with the young people during the first survey wave and increase the likelihood of survey re-engagement at ages 19 and 21, surveys were administered in-person and by phone. Online surveys were not utilized with the 17-year-old cohort since many young people living in out-of-home care have limited access to technology. In March 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews

practice making phone calls to schedule and conduct the interview. During the role plays, students provided each other with feedback; additionally, trainers observed, answered questions, and provided feedback.

After the initial training, students continued to be supported in multiple ways. Students could choose to have a staff member shadow them in conducting an actual interview and receive feedback. Internship supervisors regularly checked in with students about their NYTD assignments, while the CWEP Research Coordinator answered student questions and monitored interview completion. CWEP staff members also engaged students in conversations about their learning related to the experiences of transition-age young people and conducting research.

Marketing to Young People

Another important aspect of NYTD is marketing the survey to young people and encouraging them to participate. In August 2019, DCS convened a group of young people to discuss project branding ideas. Free transportation was provided using a ride sharing app code, an innovative practice that DCS has continued to use. Young people gave feedback on how to describe the purpose of NYTD, utilize and disseminate data, and brand the project with images and logos. They wanted NYTD to serve as an outreach touchpoint to

connect young people with desired services. Young people demonstrated a sense of ownership over the project, wanting to use their voices to share their own data in meaningful ways and for data to be shared back with them.

Project Next Steps

From the onset of the project, the partners have met regularly to discuss progress and plan for future cohorts. The DCS Statewide Independent Living Coordinator facilitates a biweekly partner meeting to ensure that data is being transmitted correctly and discuss any issues that arise while conducting interviews. Partners are also creating new survey instruments for 19 and 21 year olds. Similar to the development process for the 17-year-old survey, young people participated in live online focus groups via Zoom to give feedback on potential new survey questions. Innovative techniques were used to ascertain feedback, such as a word cloud, polling games, and group discussions. Consistent with the desires of young people, partners plan to share the data back with youth and the community. For example, the partners created infographics to highlight some of the preliminary findings and shared them with CWEP students, community partners, and the virtual focus groups with young people.

Recommendations for Collaborations

Throughout this project, the partners have learned several lessons that may support other NYTD partnerships between child welfare agencies and universities. Planning and communication are essential for large projects across multiple organizations. Developing a process map, a task list with dates and responsible individuals, and detailed interview procedures helped all parties understand and implement the project. Partners need to create clear processes for meeting federal reporting requirements and sharing data. It is also important to strategically develop additional survey questions. NYTD provides a unique opportunity to collect statewide data that can help in evaluating agency goals and the effectiveness of a state's foster care program and tailored services for young adults. Universities may have faculty and staff who can combine NYTD and other administrative data to develop a more complete picture of the needs of young people in transition. They can support child welfare agencies in utilizing this data to make programmatic decisions and changes. Additionally, it is critical to engage young people in foster care in planning survey development, marketing plans, and data dissemination. Young people are the experts of their own lives and can give meaningful feedback about their peers. In Arizona, young people emphasized the importance of using NYTD as a service referral touchpoint, asking questions about their positive experiences and aspirations, and sharing research findings with them.

Many university students are required to complete internships and conduct research as part of their degree programs,

including social work students. Title IV-E training programs can be used to strategically support federal data collection for NYTD and other reports. Conducting surveys and analyzing data provides students preparing to work in child welfare with an opportunity to learn more about the needs and strengths of transition age young people. To train students to conduct research interviews, it is critical to have a responsive interviewer training with opportunities to practice and receive meaningful feedback. Throughout the length of the project, staff needed to provide continued guidance and monitoring.

Conclusion

Arizona NYTD highlights the potential for partnerships between child welfare agencies and universities. These partnerships can reduce the burden on agency staff to conduct interviews while also increasing the number of completed interviews and reducing the likelihood of paying federal penalties. In addition to NYTD, there are many opportunities for collaboration to meet federal reporting requirements, evaluate program effectiveness, and conduct meaningful research. Child welfare agency and university partnerships can benefit both organizations and improve services provided to children and families. To find out more, visit <https://www.unytdaz.com>. ■



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