



# Utilizing Coaching to Prevent Homelessness Among Transition-Age Youth with Foster Care Histories

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## Overview

Since 2013, Colorado’s Department of Human Services (CDHS) Division of Child Welfare has been collaborating with partner agencies to design, implement, and test a model intervention designed to prevent homelessness among youth with current or prior foster care involvement. Colorado’s Pathways to Success (Pathways) program is funded under a demonstration project from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Children’s Bureau program titled Youth-at-Risk-of-Homelessness (YARH). The program is designed to serve youth ages 14 to 21 who are currently in or transitioning out of foster care, or who are homeless and have prior involvement with foster care. Currently in Phase 2, the formative evaluation phase, the model is being implemented and tested in three collaborative sites—representing urban, suburban/second city, and rural communities—across Colorado.

Pathways is designed to meet youth where they are in their lived experience. The intervention is designed to be youth-driven, strengths-based, and growth-oriented. The model’s programmatic components include a coaching-based model of youth engagement, housing navigation, flexible and small-scale financial assistance, a focus on advancing permanency, and resource referrals. Organized around the long-term goal of preventing homelessness, short- and intermediate-term outcome goals include increases in youth self-efficacy and self-determination, as well as gains made related to the five “pathways” of permanent connections, health and well-being, housing, education, and employment.

To learn more about the Pathways model development and implementation, the first research brief in the Pathways series outlines the full Pathways to Success model development (Davis, Prendergast, McHugh, 2018). This second brief focuses on describing the model’s core component of “coach-like youth engagement.” Adapted from Co-Active Life Coaching (CALC), coach-like engagement helps transition-age youth build self-efficacy, self-determination, and independent living skills. This method is employed by caseworkers—referred to in the intervention as navigators—who provide intensive and individualized support for Pathways youth. Navigators assist youth in meeting basic needs and achieving at least two youth-identified goals related to the five key outcome areas or “pathways” of permanency, housing, well-being, employment, and education. They do so by utilizing techniques that cultivate each youth’s ability to meet his or her own needs in the future. Coach-like engagement aims to do precisely what one youth articulated in describing how his navigator worked with him: *“[M]y navigator slowly helped me teach myself how I could help myself. He was able to show me what I need to do to help me. With that I can now talk to anyone, and have conversations, and learn.”* This brief provides background on the navigator as a coach development, followed by a description of how navigators engage youth in a coach-like way. The research brief provides reactions from youth generated from focus groups, detailing their reactions and experiences in working with navigators in a coach-like way, and outlines the challenges and next steps in the Pathways model.

## Background and Theory

The Pathways model of coach-like engagement is grounded in life coaching theory. While models and definitions vary, life coaching can be generally understood as a forward-looking and solution-oriented process in which the coach supports the coachee's personal growth and goal attainment. Coachees set and drive the agenda; coaches provide guidance and results-oriented support. In contrast to skill or workplace-based coaching, life coaching models are holistic and generally focused on personal growth or development issues (Grant, 2005). In non-clinical adult populations, evidence-based life coaching interventions have been shown to increase well-being and hope (Green, Oades & Grant, 2006), life satisfaction and goal attainment (Spence & Grant, 2005), and self-confidence and self-esteem (Hall, 2014), and to decrease depression, anxiety, and stress (Grant, 2003).

Rigorous research on the impacts of coaching in youth populations is limited but nonetheless promising. Studies on a year-long, school-based coaching program with high school seniors found that the program increased students' hope (Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007), confidence, motivation, and goal-setting abilities (Campbell & Gardner, 2005). A similar intervention for primary school boys also achieved significant increases in self-reported hope and engagement (Madden, Green & Grant, 2011). While limited, research on the use of coaching models with at-risk youth specifically is similarly encouraging. For example, a qualitative study on a program that used coaching as one tool for engaging at-risk teenagers in goal setting found that youth reported feeling an increased sense of self-confidence and ability to both set and work toward goals at program completion (Aronowitz, 2005). A randomized control trial of an intervention that incorporated coaching to strengthen the self-determination skills of youth aging out of foster care found that the treatment group had substantially higher quality of life, employment, and education outcomes at program completion and at the one-year follow-up (Powers et al., 2012). More recently, an assessment of a pilot project that involved implementing an executive skills coaching model found it to be promising as a means of empowering at-risk youth (Dechausay, 2018).

The Pathways to Success model of coach-like youth engagement is specifically adapted from the Co-Active Life Coaching (CALC) theory and method. CALC is widespread, standardized, and rigorous. It has been extensively studied in relation to behavioral health and found to result in outcomes including increased overall health, self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence, and self-acceptance (Hall, 2014). CALC centers on the relationship between the coach and coachee, who are conceived of as "collaborators" in the "purpose of meeting the coachee's needs" (Kimsey-House et al., 2018, p. 3). While the agenda is set and driven by the coachee, the coach is expected to present constructive challenges as a means of accelerating change. Building a strong relationship is thus a critical task for the coach as it is foundational to catalyzing change according to the coachee's needs or goals.

The “co-active” relationship is shaped by four core principles (Kimsey-House et al., 2018):

- The assertion that people are inherently resourceful and capable of making choices, taking action, and learning
- A focus on the coachee as a whole person rather than a problem to solve
- To stay present in the moment
- To maintain a vision of the possibility of transformation

The CALC coach relies on five practices or techniques to support the coachee in achieving growth:

- Deep “level three” listening
- Paying attention to their own intuition
- Being curious and asking powerful questions
- Forwarding action and learning
- Managing one’s own opinions and judgments

The work the coach and coachee do together is guided by a “designed alliance,” which is an explicit agreement regarding what will be worked on and how that work will be approached. This designed alliance is highly customized and should be revisited throughout the coaching program or relationship. While coaching generally occurs around specific and tangible goals specified in the designed alliance agreement, CALC is ultimately designed to create change that enables the coachee to live a more balanced and fulfilled life (Kimsey-House et al., 2018).

The Pathways to Success leadership team incorporated a CALC-based coaching component into the model intervention through working with the Colorado Office of Children, Youth & Families’ Child Welfare Training System (CWTS). The CWTS provides a variety of coaching services to child welfare programs and professionals across Colorado. CWTS coaches are trained through an International Coach Federation (ICF) accredited training program. They developed the coach-like engagement training manual for Pathways navigators and provided technical assistance to the Colorado Division of Child Welfare Training and Development Specialist who provided navigators with ongoing training and support.

## Implementation

The coaching-based model described in this research brief was developed through a multi-phased, three-year process. Coaching became the core component of the broader Pathways to Success model intervention through an iterative cycle of design, implementation, testing, and adaptation. A robust evaluation framework provided process and outcome data that were reported on and used to make modifications via an ongoing CQI process. These data will be highlighted in future research briefs. This brief draws on qualitative data we collected through conducting two focus groups with Pathways youth, conducting in-depth interviews with navigators and their coaching trainer, and observing quarterly navigator coaching workshops.

## The Practice of Coach-Like Youth Engagement

The Pathways to Success program has multiple components that work together to promote positive outcomes for transition-age youth. Coach-like youth engagement is one of those components. Its value derives, in part, from how it interacts with other program elements. For example, resources such as housing vouchers and small-scale financial assistance are instrumental in getting youth safely housed. Intensive coach-like support compliments these resources by helping youth build the skills and confidence to maintain their housing and access new resources in the future. In so doing, it contributes to the long-term goal of addressing homelessness among youth with foster care histories. A navigator articulated the powerful potential of this type of support:

*Coaching has the potential to decrease system dependence and is based on youth choice, which is empowering to youth and helps everyone focus not on the situation a youth is currently in, but rather where they want to be. The skill development around decision-making, goal setting, self-advocating is what will make the difference for youth in the long-run.*

Navigators engage youth in a coach-like way to help them achieve goals related to the five pathways of housing, education, employment, health and well-being, and permanent connections. Independent living skills, resiliency, self-efficacy, and confidence are cultivated in the process. Navigators rely on CALC techniques—deep or “level three” listening, curiosity, intuition, self-management, and learning/action—to do this. Level three listening is about truly hearing the vision and values of the youth. Doing this requires practicing self-management, which refers to leaving your own “stuff” at the door and resisting the temptation to be the expert or directive problem solver. Curiosity involves asking “powerful questions” that encourage reflection without being leading or judgmental. Intuition is the skill of paying attention to and honoring subtle, nuanced signals being communicated by the youth. Finally, learning/action is about forwarding action and facilitating learning through offering challenges, encouragement, and gentle accountability (Colorado Child Welfare Training System, 2016).

“The fundament of coaching is to help people reach their higher potential and to become their best selves.”

—Pathways Navigator

The Pathways model is “coach-like” because the coaching relationship is somewhat moderated by program parameters. These include that each youth is expected to identify and work toward achieving at least two “linchpin” goals. Navigators work with youth to find and build a lasting relationship with at least one supportive adult regardless of whether such a connection is identified as a linchpin goal. Several evaluation and case planning assessments must be completed during the youth’s participation in the program. And, finally, where needed, navigators connect the youth with program-specific resources such as housing vouchers or small-

scale financial assistance. Within these parameters, navigators work hard to ensure that the support they provide honors the four core CALC principles and is youth-driven, growth-oriented, and strengths-based.

Youth-driven means that the youth's needs, goals, and initiative drive the agenda. One navigator explained, "[W]e are not there to tell our clients what to do. We are there to hear their goals and just help them reach them . . . to match the energy of a client." While youth set the course and make final decisions, navigators are actively involved in the decision-making process. They provide guidance by asking non-judgmental questions, and occasionally redirect youth by reflecting back what the youth is saying to help them think through the consequences of making a potentially self-destructive decision. The navigator's job is to provide the youth with opportunities to make their own choices while helping them develop tools to make those choices wisely.

"Coaching is a mentality that youth are creative, resourceful, and whole. It's solution-focused, the idea that a client has everything they need."

Growth-oriented involves challenging youth to put their plans into action and making that follow-through possible by directly addressing barriers standing in the way. For example, if a youth wants to get a job, the navigator may challenge her to fill out five job applications before their next meeting. If transportation is a barrier, the navigator may provide the youth with a bus pass or gas money. If the youth is confused about where to look or is anxious about asking for applications, the navigator may offer to take her directly to appropriate businesses or organizations and accompany her through the process of submitting applications. Challenges and powerful questions are particularly important in this model. As one navigator explained:

*[They] go a long way in helping them [youth] with skills down the road . . . the powerful questions really get them to think because we can fill out applications all day and night, but that's not gonna get anyone thinking about their actions or their behaviors. It's what helps create that long-term sustainable change.*

Navigators make challenges carefully and where appropriate. When youth are in crisis or need more therapeutic support, that is provided. But coach-like engagement is future-focused; the arc of the navigator's interactions with the youth is to help her think about where she wants to be, then guide her through developing the skills she needs to get there. This is done by building on the youth's strengths and relating to the youth as a capable, resourceful individual. One navigator said that coaching is in many ways a "mentality that youth are creative, resourceful and whole" that revolves around having a "vision of youth being whole, which is a different perspective than workers who come in seeing youth as broken."

At the beginning of the coaching process, navigators work with youth to establish a designed alliance and articulate linchpin goals. Designing an alliance involves discussing goals, boundaries, and strategies for maintaining an effective relationship. In addition to clarifying a youth's agenda,

the designed alliance becomes a tool for staying on track and maintaining focus. It is both a formal agreement (written or oral) and a process of conversation. Navigators conceptualize this part of the coaching process as the relationship-building phase that is critical to both establishing trust and “[a] mutual vision or focus on youth needs and future planning.” The heart of coach-like engagement—forwarding action through offering incremental challenges—depends on the development of this foundation. This process is iterative. Early engagement focuses on establishing a designed alliance; as the youth’s goals or life conditions shift, the agreement is revisited.

Goal-setting is incorporated into the designed alliance process. Linchpin goals relate to the five pathways; they may look like securing stable housing, finding a job, enrolling in school, or connecting with mental health services. One navigator explained the value of goal-setting by saying:

*[G]oals are really important to give purpose and direction to the work navigator and youth do with each other . . . the goals also keep the work on track and make it so that time is about something, not just hanging out. They also provide a way to set helpful challenges for [the] youth.*

Goal-setting is also critical to building life skills necessary for independence. A navigator articulated this, explaining, “[Goal-setting] teaches them that accountability piece. Also, that self-advocacy piece too because they’re learning, ‘okay, I can do this on my own.’ So, when they’re on their own they can start setting goals for themselves and accomplishing those goals.” Another added that the process of setting, working toward, accomplishing, and being able to celebrate goals provides “a sense of accomplishment that a lot of these youth don’t feel very often.” The Pathways model requires each youth to articulate at least two overarching goals. Navigators help youth achieve those goals through breaking them down into incremental pieces. The navigator’s challenge is to help the youth identify incremental goals that are both feasible and challenging enough to help them grow.

Some youth enroll in Pathways during a period of crisis. This is especially true for youth who are pregnant or parenting and/or homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness at enrollment. When a youth is in crisis, the primary focus of the navigator is on crisis stabilization. Designing an alliance, articulating goals, and employing coach-like engagement techniques are generally delayed until the youth is no longer in crisis and has some level of stability. The Pathways program provides the navigator with several tools including state housing vouchers (for a select cohort of eligible youth) and flexible funds that can be used for any number of immediate needs to help the youth stabilize. During these situations, navigators tend to take on tasks directly rather than coaching youth through the process of accomplishing them. For example, when a youth is in a safe housing situation but wanting to find something different, the navigator may challenge the youth to go look at four apartments before their next meeting. If a youth is homeless and/or in an unsafe situation, the navigator will find available apartments and then drive the youth to all the appointments necessary to getting safely housed. While the latter scenario does not rely on

coach-like engagement per se, the impacts may be similar, as youth see the navigator modelling how to advocate and get things done.

Gaining the trust of youth is critical to successful coach-like engagement. Asking powerful questions and offering challenges can only be done when a strong and trusting relationship is in place. Multiple programmatic and individual factors contribute to the development of this foundation. Programmatically, the Pathways model ensures that navigators have a relatively small case load (10 youth for a full-time navigator) so they can be available, responsive, and able to provide intensive support to their youth. Navigators are thus able to show up and follow-through for their youth. They generally meet with their youth every week and communicate via phone, text, or email in between meetings. The youth-driven nature of the program also allows navigators to genuinely support the youth in doing what they want to do, which can be an empowering and unique experience. Navigators emphasize this to youth when explaining the program by saying things like *“My goal is to help you get to your goals.”* This is reinforced by providing customized support; flexibility on when and what services are provided is built into the model.

## Intended Outcomes

The support and guidance that navigators provide help youth achieve their self-identified linchpin goals that are intended to cultivate independent living skills, long-term goal setting or self-determination, and self-efficacy.

These outcomes are critical to the program’s ultimate goal of preventing future homelessness for youth served. As one navigator explained, *“[T]he skill development around decision-making, goal setting, and self-advocating is what will make the difference for youth in the long run.”* Another spoke to the potential of coach-like engagement, saying, *“[Y]outh feel empowered and supported and if they have dips in life they have the internal resources to find that empowerment and support.”* The navigator’s assessment of the extent to which the youth has demonstrated increased ability in relation to these coaching outcomes is a core component of program completion.

A youth’s readiness to complete the intervention is assessed using a standardized “graduation criteria” tool. The Pathways evaluation team developed this tool through facilitating a robust process that involved research on coaching theory and multiple rounds of engaging navigators, supervisors, project leaders, the coach-like engagement trainer, and youth. In final form, the graduation tool includes eight criteria, two of which are coaching outcomes. A youth must meet a minimum of five criteria to be deemed ready for program completion. This flexibility reflects the customized nature of the Pathways intervention. Criteria include and are defined as follows:



Criterion	Definition
<input type="checkbox"/> Not in crisis	Basic needs in terms of housing, food, and health are met
<input type="checkbox"/> In stable housing	Not currently homeless; can be in foster placement, shelter environment, or other temporary housing
<input type="checkbox"/> At least one supportive adult connection	Adult can be family, friend, or other community connection; non-professionals
<input type="checkbox"/> Completed assessments	Screening, baseline, Engagement and Empowerment Scale (EES), Youth Connections Scale (YCS) (two) completed and entered into PMIS
<input type="checkbox"/> Achieved two linchpin goals	Achievement or completion of goals is determined by youth and navigator
<input type="checkbox"/> Has daily living skills necessary to sustaining independence	Youth has the basic living skills navigator and supervisor deem necessary to sustaining safe and stable living arrangement and independence (e.g., hygiene, cleaning, etc.)
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Self-determination:</b> Demonstrated ability to make and set new goals	“Having the power to make decisions, to direct one’s actions, to dream and take risks, and to exercise rights and responsibilities.” (Powers et al., 2012, p. 2181)
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Self-efficacy:</b> Demonstrated increase in confidence, ability to self-advocate, and be assertive	“People’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave.” (Bandura, 1994, p. 1)

Figure 1 Pathways to Success Graduation Criteria

In the Pathways model, navigators meet youth where they are. As such, there is no universal benchmark for what exactly increased self-efficacy or self-determination look like. Some youth will graduate from Pathways when they have secured their own apartment, developed the basic living skills necessary to sustain their independence, and become comfortable with advocating for themselves. Other youth will do so when they have demonstrated an ability to articulate personal goals and follow through on making weekly meetings. The assessment process is thus individualized but nonetheless guided by clear and consistent definitions of anticipated coaching outcomes.

### Staff Training

Ongoing training is critical to ensuring program staff have the skills and tools to practice (or supervise) coach-like engagement. Navigator training in coach-like engagement involves an initial two-day training, quarterly skills-development workshops, and monthly group coaching calls. At the orientation training, child welfare staff trained in the CALC method introduce navigators to the principles and techniques of coach-like engagement and provide them with a learner manual. One of the CWTS staff members continues to work with the navigators as their coaching trainer.

Roughly following a train-the-trainer model, the trainer works with navigators on establishing and revisiting a designed alliance, which takes the form of a coaching agreement. The trainer facilitates monthly coaching calls in which navigators practice their skills by coaching one another

and then debriefing to reflect on their usage of specific techniques. Such opportunities for peer learning are critical to enhancing skills. One navigator spoke to their value, saying, *“I really love the monthly coaching calls. And I think they’re so helpful because it’s like a foreign language. If you don’t use it, you lose it.”*

The trainer also plans three- to five-hour quarterly workshops, which involve practice sessions, discussions of opportunities and challenges encountered working with youth, and skills refreshers. One-on-one calls in which the trainer coaches navigators are held as needed. The sustained relationship between trainer and navigator encourages navigators to ask questions and talk about where they are struggling in their own coaching practice with youth. It also provides the trainer with continuous feedback on what techniques need strengthening.

In addition to providing a robust training program for navigators, the trainer also provides coaching sessions for supervisors. Each supervisor receives the same training as the navigator, and an additional quarterly supervisor training. It is important to train supervisors in the Pathways model, as each navigator is overseen by a supervisor who is responsible for managing Pathways at the agency level, helping troubleshoot challenges arising for youth, and generally providing emotional support to the navigator. Since coach-like engagement is a new method of working with transition-age youth, supervisors will not likely have experience with it. Without having a strong grasp on the theory and techniques, it is hard for supervisors to provide appropriate guidance or hold navigators accountable to implementing the model with fidelity.

## Youth Experiences

Youth perspectives on the coach-like engagement model were systematically collected through the facilitation of two focus groups. Eleven youth participated in total: one was a Pathways graduate, and the rest were actively enrolled at the time of the focus groups. The youth represented each Pathways site and thus were able to speak to the experience of working with a navigator in each of the sites. Navigators were not present during the focus groups. Youth were provided with modest gift-card incentives for their time and participation, along with food and transportation for those who needed it.

Comments made in the focus groups indicated that the model intervention has been helpful, even transformative. For some, participating in Pathways provided a boost in life. One youth described Pathways as *“a stepping stone I needed to get to another level in my life.”* For others, it helped them experience a turning point. This was especially true for young people who had been homeless when they enrolled in the program. One formerly homeless youth who had worked with his navigator to secure housing stated, *“[I]f it wasn’t for my navigator, at this moment I would probably be sleeping on the side of the street.”* Such statements are encouraging indicators of the model intervention’s promise. Focus group discussions also shed light on how youth have experienced specific elements of the program, including coach-like engagement.

Four striking patterns emerged in the focus groups:

- 1) The model intervention's value centers on the relationship developed between youth and navigator.
- 2) Youths' descriptions of what it was like to work with their navigators mirrored the theoretical coach-like engagement model.
- 3) Youth reported experiencing personal growth in relation to the theoretical coaching outcomes.
- 4) To provide effective support, coach-like engagement must be paired with other service-related program components.

These themes were echoed in several additional forums for eliciting youth input, including one site-specific youth focus group and short interviews conducted by a Pathways supervisor in preparation for a project planning retreat.

### **1) The Pathways model intervention values center on the relationship developed between youth and navigator.**

When asked what they found to be most valuable about Pathways, youth responded with comments including *"the support," "emotional connection," "having someone there to motivate me to do things,"* and *"having a person that's there for you and that you can talk to."* While youth talked about benefiting significantly from the resources provided through the program, their navigator's support and belief in them is what mattered most. This reflects on the importance of navigator's focus on building a strong and trusting relationship with their youth.

*"It's just that personal connection that I appreciate. Having that presence is really nice. It's nice to have someone that's not only professional but personal with you. I like the fact that there's that connection. It makes things a lot easier to communicate and a lot easier to be like, 'Hey, this is what I need.'"*

Youth further suggested that the strength of this relationship impacted the extent to which they were willing or able to take advantage of the resources offered through Pathways. Having an authentic connection with their navigator also encouraged them to embrace challenges to take initiative in making things happen for themselves. Youth expressed feeling like they could ask their navigator for help precisely because they had a personal connection that made them feel like someone *"actually cares"* and *"has belief in and sees something in me."* They recognized that there was value in not only being supported, but also challenged to do things for themselves. Having a *"connection"* and *"trust"* with the navigator provided motivation and constructive accountability. In talking about the importance of having a relationship-based rather than exclusively service-based intervention, one youth said, *"[Y]ou have to have someone pushing you to do it [access resources]."*

Given the significance of the connection between the youth and navigator in this model intervention, youth were asked to describe how they related to their navigator. Responses

suggested that they saw navigators as something between a professional and close friend. One youth described the relationship he had with his navigator saying it was like having “*a friend with boundaries*” and another said that whereas she often felt like she was seen as a “*portfolio not a person*” by system workers, she knew her navigator really cared about her because she was always “*ecstatic to see us.*” Finally, one youth explained working with a navigator was like, “*having a guidance counselor you can solve all your problems with.*” Both qualities of professionalism and more personal familiarity were valued as one was necessary to forwarding the youth’s growth and the other to cultivating trust.

## **2) Youths’ descriptions of what it was like to work with their navigators mirrored the theoretical coach-like engagement model.**

To understand whether navigators were consistently utilizing the techniques of coach-like engagement, youth were asked to describe how navigators interacted with them. The repetition and similarity of comments made by youth regardless of which navigator they worked with provided compelling evidence of the alignment between navigators actual practice and the theoretical model. Youth spoke about being listened to without judgement, being challenged and held to account in a supportive way, and being empowered to set and accomplish goals according to their own agendas. They did so in a way that illustrated the interconnectedness of coach-like engagement techniques.

Navigators’ utilization of being curious (listening and asking questions without judgement) and practicing self-management (letting the youth truly drive the agenda) were highlighted by one youth who said, “*[M]y navigator listens without judging you. She doesn’t judge you at all. And she doesn’t nag you, it’s whatever you want to do no matter how silly it is.*” Reflecting the designed alliance, challenge, and gentle accountability pieces, one youth said, “*[S]he has expectations of us. Like at the end of the day if you are not serious about doing these things they don’t get done. But there is still that boundary there that I like . . . she reminds me of things I have to do.*” Highlighting how her navigator helped with goal-setting, another youth explained that her navigator “*asks a lot of questions*” about what she wants to do and “*goes over two big things you want to get done to have something to focus on.*”

Statements also suggested that navigators were skilled in ensuring the intervention was authentically youth-driven. When asked how they would describe the program to a friend, one youth said, “*[I]t’s a program that helps me achieve what I want to achieve in my life. It’s super focused around what I want and need instead of what the system wants me to do.*” Another commented, “*[T]hey don’t tell you what you have to do. [T]hey’re like, ‘[W]hen you’re ready I can go with you,’ and I like that a lot.*”

Finally, youth made comments about how navigators motivated them to work toward their goals while providing them with a pathway to develop the skills and confidence necessary to be able

to help themselves in the future. In one focus group, a youth said, “[I]t’s not just like, ‘[H]ere are your resources.’ It’s like, ‘[O]h, you don’t know how to do this, let me show you the way so later on down the line when I am not there, you will know [how to accomplish that task].’” Another youth explained:

*My navigator has been my rock . . . she has showed me the resources and then let me try to figure it out on my own. If I couldn’t she was always there and willing to help. That’s what I really appreciate about Pathways . . . she has helped me learn how to manage.*

### **3) Youth reported experiencing personal growth in relation to the theoretical coaching outcomes.**

Multiple youth reported feeling more self-confident and able to navigate systems on their own as a result of working with their navigator. One youth explained how he had gained self-confidence:

*The way she [my navigator] lays things out and gets things done, not only are they getting done but I’m seeing what she is doing and how to do it so I’m like “oh I could do this on my own” and in turn that gives me self-confidence.*

Another youth echoed this sentiment, explaining, “[Navigators] teach you how to do it so then you know how to do it and you gain confidence that way.” While youth did not explicitly mention feeling more capable of setting and achieving goals, their statements suggested that they had made gains in developing these skills.

“The way [my navigator] lays things out and gets things done, not only are they getting done but I’m seeing what she is doing and how to do it so I’m like, ‘[O]h, I could do this on my own,’ and in turn that gives me self-confidence.”

The one focus group participant who had recently graduated said that she had gained independent living skills. This increased her independence, which made her feel like she no longer needed the support of her navigator or the resources offered through Pathways. She talked about how she had grown: “I learned how to be more independent. Because now I’m going to all my appointments and actually applying for jobs and I started school last week.”

### **4) To provide effective support, coach-like engagement must be paired with other program components.**

Youths’ experiences illustrate the way in which the components of the Pathways model intervention work together to advance positive outcomes. By itself, coach-like engagement does not provide adequate support for youth who have very immediate and tangible needs. Coaching cannot secure safe and stable housing, fill empty cupboards with groceries, or address mental health struggles. Indeed, the potential it does have—to promote independence and stability—may only be realized when youths’ short-term needs can be met through additional programmatic components. This understanding informed the development of the Pathways

model intervention, which includes but is not limited to the coaching-based piece. Youths' experiences affirmed the importance of such a design.

One story powerfully illustrates the value and significance of Pathways' multi-faceted design. A young mother who had given birth while enrolled in Pathways said that if not for the support she received through Pathways, she *"would've been homeless and pregnant in the winter time."* She added that her navigator had helped her leave an abusive living situation, get a driver's license, secure long-term housing, and set up a new household for her and her baby. These gains were made through tapping into multiple program components. A state housing voucher was critical to securing housing, and the program's flexible financial assistance provided the youth with access to money for paying for a driver's license and setting up a new apartment. Coach-like engagement shaped the process by which these resources were accessed. It was a process that encouraged her to take initiative, then supported her in following through. In so doing, it increased the youth's confidence in her own abilities to remain independent and rely on herself in the future. As she said, *"[Y]ou get out of Pathways what you put in, you have to reach out to get the resources you need. You have to choose to let it help you. [You h]ave to show up and then it helps you be more independent."* The process of reaching out and showing up was likely empowering for this young woman precisely because it resulted in the attainment of very tangible and needed resources. That is a critical takeaway about the utility of the coach-like engagement approach: its potential is likely dependent on the extent to which other resources are available for helping youth overcome the barriers that stand in the way of goals they set out to achieve.

## Challenges

We have identified several notable challenges to implementing this model intervention effectively. While developing the model has presented several common programmatic difficulties such as contending with staff turnover and capacity constraints, we want to focus here on challenges related to the model intervention's unique design.

Two of the most significant relate to permanency, which is a known challenge for foster care youth generally. Pathways is designed to engage with this issue by having navigators help youth identify and build relationships with other supportive adults, but finding those connections has proven to be difficult for many youth. Youth need to have supportive adult connections in place for the navigator to no longer be needed. One youth said that to no longer need her navigator she would need *"someone else to be my support person."* Another explained that her readiness to complete the program *"would be finding somebody else that would be there for me. And that's so hard to find."* Identifying and developing long-term supportive connections can be a barrier to independence and program completion that coach-like engagement itself can do little to address. Secondly, the intervention is both short-term and relationship-based. Navigators must therefore gain the trust of youth, which means becoming someone youth can count on, while nonetheless remaining a transitional support person. This requires striking a delicate balance. It also presents the challenge of providing youth with full and up-front information about the short-term nature

of the support without setting them up to feel like the navigator is just one more person who is going to walk out of their life.

Finally, there is the anticipated complexity involved in streamlining and scaling the intervention as a means of making it sustainable. This may be most effectively achieved through incorporating the Pathways to Success model into child welfare agencies. Doing so would present advantages as well as a range of challenges. Some of the most significant relate to reconciling agency protocols, structure, and demands with the flexibility and youth-driven approach of the model intervention. Specifically, it may be difficult for agencies to embrace a coaching methodology that depends on workers supporting youth as they work toward a self-identified, rather than worker- or agency-identified, agenda. Resolving these issues will require more planning and continuous evaluation research.

## Next Steps

The qualitative data reviewed in this brief indicate that coach-like engagement shows promise as a model for promoting successful transitions to independence for foster care youth. They suggest that the method should be incorporated as a part of a program rather than a stand-alone intervention. The Pathways to Success program does this, with encouraging initial success. Outcome data have been collected throughout the formative evaluation phase. These data are promising but also limited, as they reflect a phase of active programmatic adaptation. Reliable measurement of a set intervention will come as the project moves into the outcome evaluation phase.

An outcome evaluation will allow us to quantify the short- and intermediate-term impacts of Pathways in general, and coach-like engagement in particular. It will also allow us to gain deeper insight into the challenges, limitations, and specific potential of this innovative model. Such an evaluation is thus an important next step to take.

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