



**Youth
Thrive**
An initiative
of CSSP

YOUTH THRIVE



OUR STORY (SO FAR)

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY

WWW.CSSP.ORG



ABOUT YOUTH THRIVE

Youth Thrive believes that all young people should be valued, loved, and supported to reach their goals. To achieve this, Youth Thrive works with youth-serving systems, organizations, and partners to change policies, programs, and practices so that they build on what we know about adolescent development, value young people’s perspectives, and give youth opportunities to succeed. Learn more about Youth Thrive here: [CSSP.org/our-work/project/youth-thrive/](https://www.CSSP.org/our-work/project/youth-thrive/).

ABOUT CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children, youth, and families thrive. We translate ideas into action, promote public policies grounded in equity, and support strong and inclusive communities. We advocate with and for all children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices. Learn more at www.CSSP.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & SUGGESTED CITATION

The Center for the Study of Social Policy’s Youth Thrive Team is deeply appreciative of the many contributions of the Youth Thrive Sites, Youth Thrive Ambassadors, our national network of Exemplary Initiatives, trainers, policymakers, and partners who generously shared their time, ideas, and experiences in their work with youth and families. This Story is their story. The strategies and lessons chronicled here would not exist without them. Thanks also to the individuals who were interviewed and whose quotes and perspectives enliven this document. We are also grateful to our CSSP communications staff, the Pyramid Communications firm, and others at CSSP for their contributions to the content, design and review of this document.

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INTRODUCTION

OVER ITS 40-YEAR HISTORY, THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY (CSSP) HAS FOCUSED ITS EFFORTS ON PROMOTING THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES IN THE UNITED STATES.

To realize this vision, CSSP works to ensure that communities are inclusive and offer support to families living there; that public systems provide the resources and opportunities sought and needed by families; and that public policies create more equitable opportunities and outcomes for all children, youth, and families.

For the past decade, CSSP has focused on addressing what happens to youth who are the most marginalized by society, specifically those who are involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems or who have experienced homelessness. Despite notable progress over the past years in reducing the numbers of youth in foster care and detention, involvement in these systems still results in an array of negative outcomes with youth being denied opportunities to reach their goals and to productively contribute to our country's future. This is particularly true for Black, Native, and LGBTQ+ youth who are disproportionately represented in care and who experience disparities that further impact their ability to thrive.

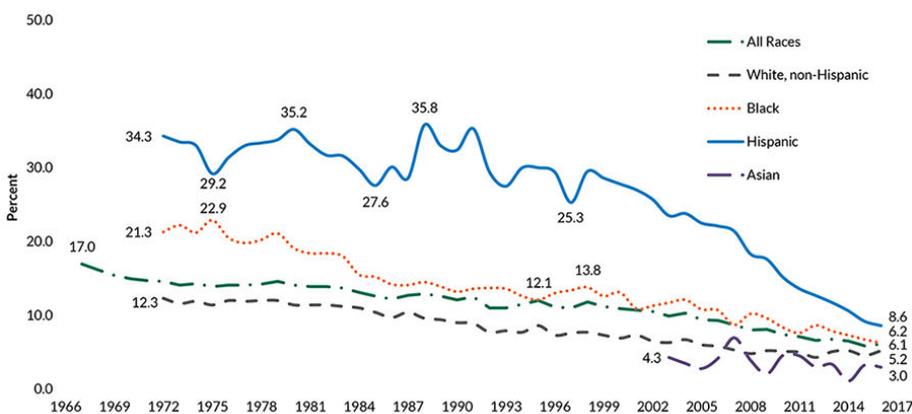
This report describes efforts through 2019 by CSSP's Youth Thrive initiative to increase opportunities so that all youth have the chance to thrive.



WHEN YOUTH THRIVE, WE ALL THRIVE

ALL YOUTH SHOULD HAVE THE OPPORTUNITIES AND SUPPORTS THEY NEED TO THRIVE AND BECOME HEALTHY, HAPPY ADULTS.

Figure 1. REDUCTION IN HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES⁵
 Status High School Dropout* Rates Among Youth Ages 16 to 24, by Race and Hispanic Origin:** Selected Years, 1967–2016



*The status dropout rate measures the percentage of young adults ages 16 to 24 who were not enrolled in school and had not received a high school diploma or obtained a GED. This measure excludes people in the military and those who are incarcerated, but includes immigrants who never attended U.S. schools.
 **Due to changes in race categories, estimates from 2003 are not strictly comparable to estimates from 2002 and before. After 2001, the black race category includes Hispanics.
 Source: Child Trends' calculations using U.S. Census Bureau. (2017). *School enrollment in the United States: October - detailed tables* [Table 1]. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/topics/education/school-enrollment/data/tables.html>.

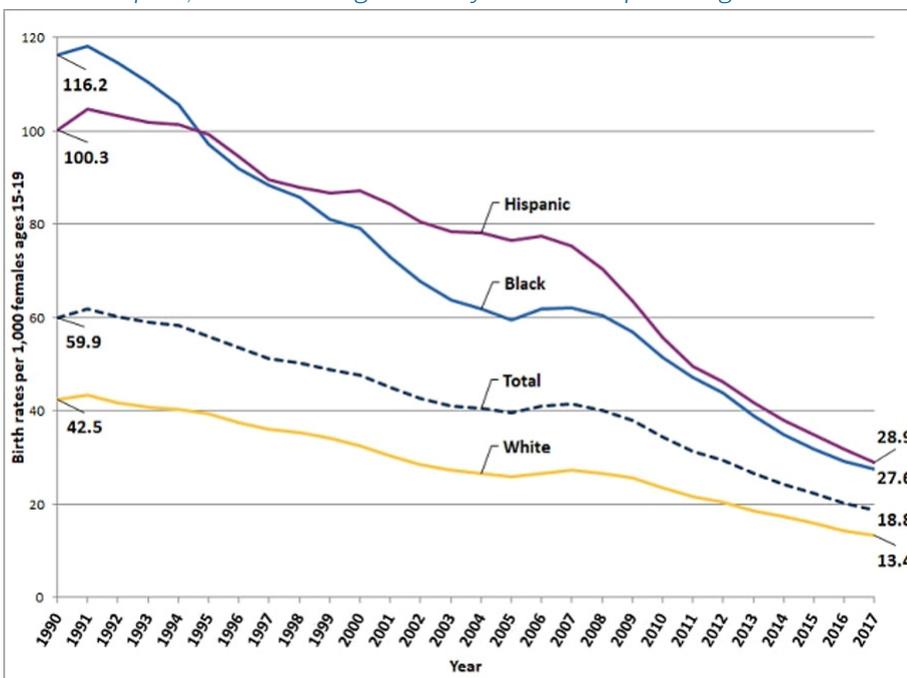
childtrends.org

In fact, all of our futures depend on the ability of today's young people to successfully contribute to society. Youth and young adults bring innovative ideas and new values into every aspect of our lives—family, community, business, technology, arts, politics and public service. Young people determine what happens next in terms of the norms, culture, institutions, and laws that make up our nation's very fabric.

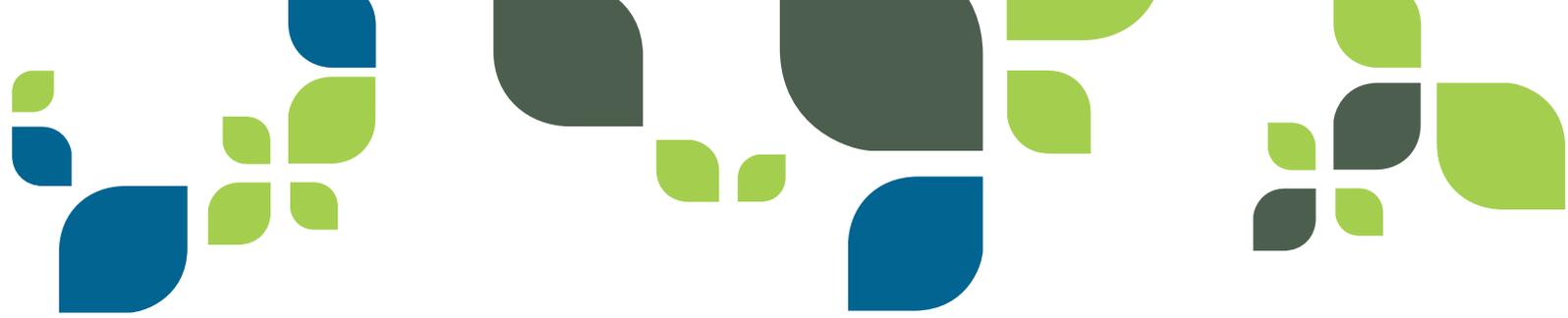
The good news is there is much to celebrate when it comes to youth. Looking back over the last decade, youth as a cohort have made many healthy and productive choices. Their progress is documented in many positive trends compared to that of prior generations. For example, more youth are completing high school (see Figure 1) and there are fewer teen pregnancies (see Figure 2). Today's teens are less likely to smoke, drink alcohol, and use drugs as compared to previous adolescents:

Figure 2. REDUCTION IN TEEN BIRTHS⁶

Birth rates per 1,000 females age 15-19 by race and Hispanic origin of mother



- Lifetime usage of cigarettes by high school seniors dropped from 34 percent in 2014 to 22 percent in 2019.¹
- Monthly alcohol consumption has decreased from 37 percent of high school seniors in 2014 to 29 percent in 2019.²

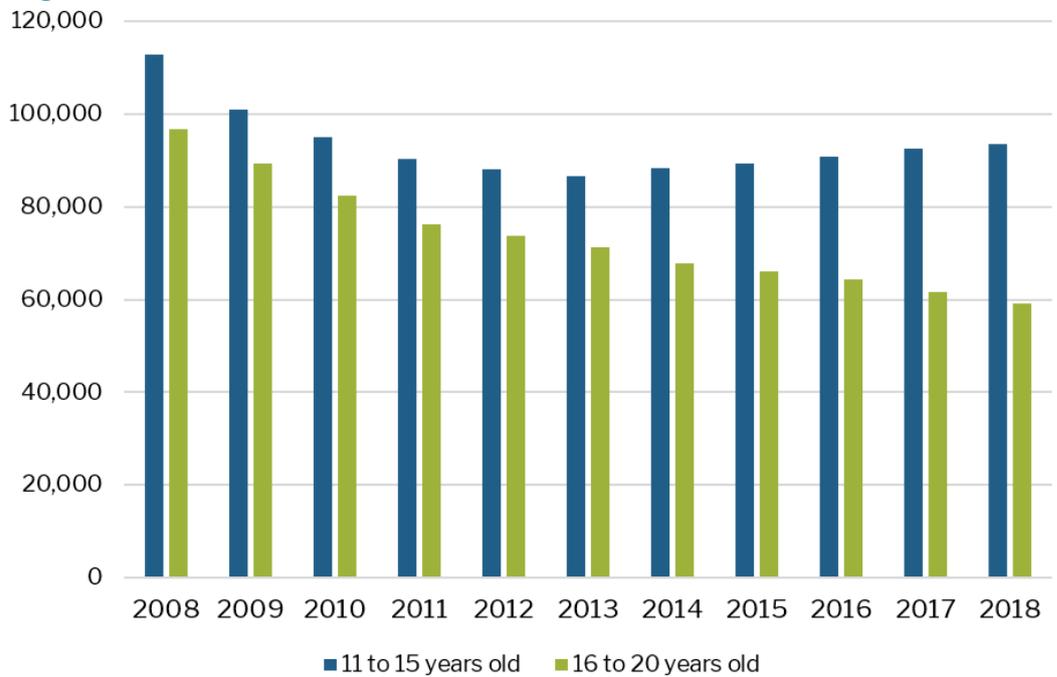


- Rates of opioid misuse by high school seniors are at lowest levels since first recorded in the early 2000s. Heroin use remains at low levels and has consistently declined in the past five years.³

And you only have to look at the news to see that youth are powerful and prominent leaders, nationally and in their local communities. It is their voices and faces that are advocating for critical issues including: climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, and gun violence. More than 26 percent of youth aged 16 to 19 are active volunteers and engaged in community service.⁴

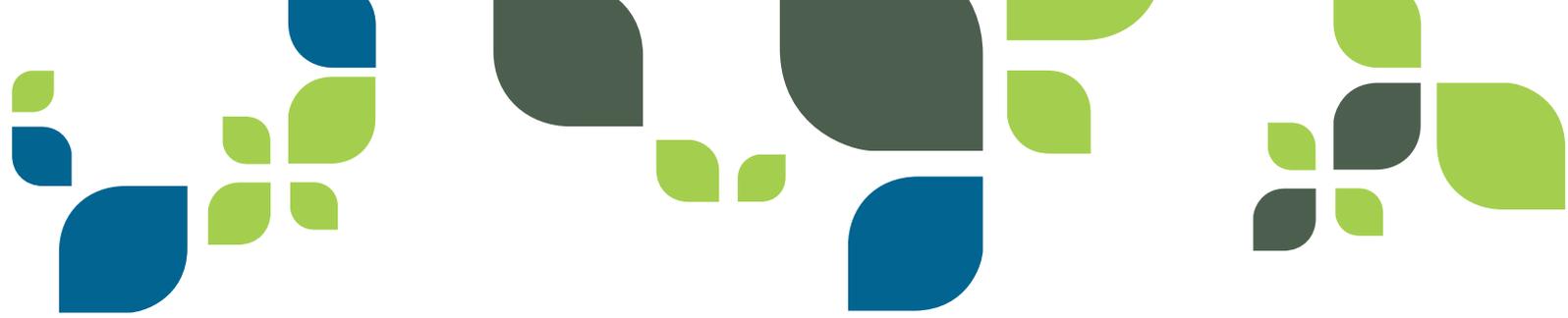
Public agencies and youth-serving systems have made and continue to make some important changes to be more attuned to what youth need and deserve. In 46 states and the District of Columbia, youth who are in out-of-home placements in foster care and are 18 years old can extend their placement and continue to receive services from child welfare agencies. In 31 states, youth have until their 21st birthday to request to return to foster care.⁷

Figure 3. YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE BY AGE GROUP



Overall, the number of children in foster care had been steadily decreasing from 459,828 in 2008 to 397,091 in 2012.⁸ Beginning in 2013, the number of children in care has been increasing, especially for young children and younger youth through age 15. The number of older youth, aged 16 to 20, in foster care, however, has continued to decrease even in recent years from 96,763 in 2008 to 61,671 in 2017 (see Figure 3).⁹ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families attributes the growing number of children entering foster care to the increase of substance abuse, including opioids, in America. Youth incarceration and confinement rates have also decreased. In 2011, there were 61,243 youth in juvenile detention, correctional, and/or residential facilities. By 2017, this number had declined to 43,580 youth in detention facilities (see Figure 4).¹⁰

Unfortunately, improvements and positive results are not equitably distributed to all youth, families, or communities. Our child welfare and juvenile justice systems are failing many youth, particularly Black, Native, and Latinx youth, and youth who are LGBTQ+.



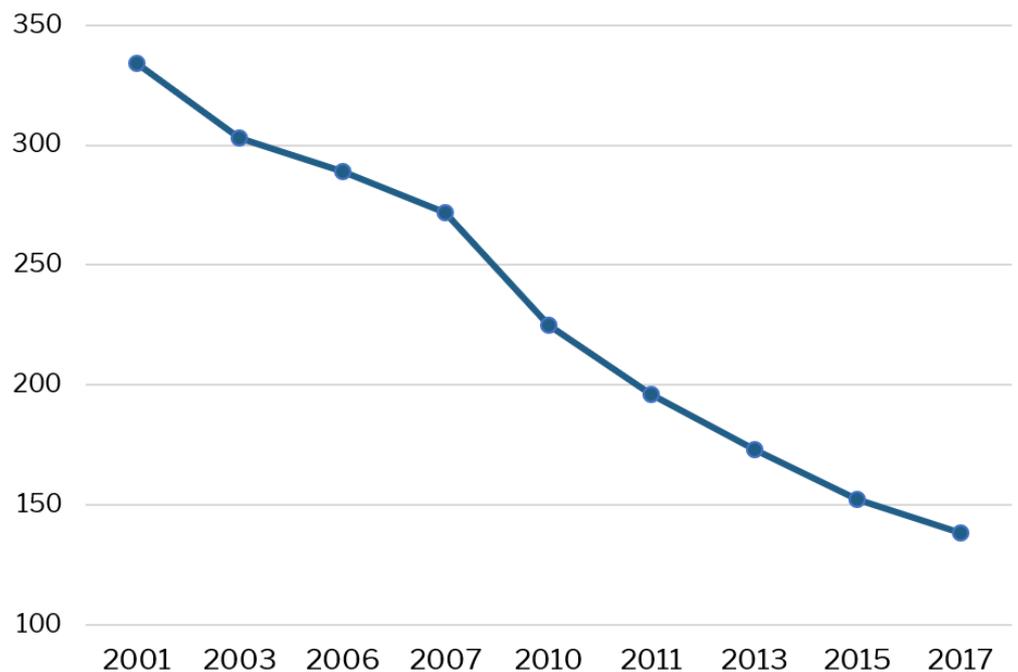
Racial disparities within the child welfare and juvenile justice systems are still present and reflect a long history of policies and practice biased against families of color. Black and Native American children and their families are too often denied access to the same supports and services as White children regardless of the circumstances that brought them to the attention of the child welfare system in the first place.

For example, Black and Native children are less likely to receive in-home services and more likely to be removed from families and placed in foster care. Once in care, they experience worse outcomes, too. Black youth are more likely to be moved to three or more foster care placements than White youth are.¹¹ In addition, they are 1.23 times more likely to age out of foster care without a family.¹² Compared to White or Latinx youth, Black youth are more likely to be placed in group homes or congregate care facilities.¹³

Although youth incarceration rates have decreased overall, more than 60 percent of Black and Latinx youth who are in foster care have also been involved with the criminal justice system.¹⁴ It is estimated that 300,000 LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming youth are arrested and detained every year—and of these youth, more than 60 percent are Black or Latinx.¹⁵ According to The Sentencing Project, while juvenile arrest rates fell 34 percent from 2003 to 2013, arrest rates of Black youth during this period increased by 24 percent. Black teens are far more likely than their White peers to be arrested across a range of offenses—not due to any differences in violent offending. This bias in arrests is a critical factor in creating the disparities in commitment and detention rates.¹⁶

It is encouraging that recent federal legislation encourages reforms that will improve how youth are served by the child welfare system. The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), passed into law on February 9, 2018, provides states with greater opportunities to better respond to the needs of young people and support their transition to adulthood. Specifically, the new law calls for:

Figure 4. YOUTH RESIDING IN JUVENILE DETENTION, CORRECTIONAL, AND/OR RESIDENTIAL FACILITIES IN THE UNITED STATES
(RATE PER 100,000)



- 
- **Reducing placements in congregate care**, including group homes and shelters, for children placed in foster care. Many states currently struggle with placing children in family foster homes and the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) not only incentivizes states to place children in family foster homes, including with kin, but also restricts federal funding for institutional and group care and provides states with grant opportunities to increase their family foster home recruitment strategies.
 - **Increasing the utilization of prevention supports** by providing opportunities for states to claim federal reimbursement for specific services to prevent youth placement in foster care whenever safe and possible.
 - **Support for pregnant and parenting youth in foster care.** FFPSA includes pregnant and parenting foster youth as candidates who are eligible for prevention services without their child being at risk of entering the foster care system.
 - **An extension of supports for older youth aging out of foster care.** FFPSA includes an extension of aftercare services for youth up to age 23 in states where there is extended foster care and the ability for youth to access Educational Training Vouchers to pursue secondary education until age 26.

Along with the demographic and policy shifts described above, there has been **a fundamental change in our understanding of adolescent development over the past two decades.** New insights about the second great wave of brain changes (after early childhood) have resulted in a deeper appreciation of the dynamic growth that occurs during this critical stage of human development. We all know that adolescence is a major and complicated period of dramatic change; often frustrating and confusing. However, the intense feelings and risk seeking that are part of adolescence also spur enormous creativity, unique insights, passionate commitments, and bold adventures. We now know that we need to balance old-fashioned and negative notions of ‘troubled teens’ with current and more realistic positive views of ‘promising people in progress.’

Developmental science has made clear that adolescence is a period of life when young people can easily pivot from a positive to a negative trajectory and back again. Adolescence and early adulthood present a critical window of opportunity for actions that promote constructive changes, nurture supportive relationships, and provide access to responsive services during this period of intense emotional, social, and cognitive learning.

Starting in 2011, CSSP launched **Youth Thrive, which is both a research-informed framework on youth well-being and an initiative (based on the framework) that is designed to change policies, practices, and services to better support healthy development and promote well-being for youth.** For the past eight years, Youth Thrive has focused on developing strategies to improve the ways in which agencies and systems serve youth who are most marginalized in society, specifically focusing on young people who are in foster care, juvenile justice systems, or at risk of homelessness.

YOUTH THRIVE: OPPORTUNITIES IN ACTION

Here's what Youth Thrive has done (see timeline on page 11):

- **We looked at what the research says.** Youth Thrive reviewed numerous research studies and findings on resilience, positive youth development, neuroscience, and trauma. We synthesized information on what reduces the impact of negative life experiences and what increases the likelihood of healthy development, healing, and well-being for all youth.
- **We focused on improving the systems that serve youth who face the greatest adversity in our country,** specifically public child welfare and juvenile justice agencies and their partners. These systems have the ability to further disenfranchise young people or to engage and empower them. There are opportunities to develop and enhance policies and practices that support young people to be successful in collaboration with these systems that intervene in families and youth's life, often in very difficult circumstances.
- **We searched for outstanding examples of programs that successfully built protective and promotive factors** into caseworkers' day-to-day work with youth who have been involved in child welfare services. Youth Thrive conducted an open, national search, reviewed more than 130 nominated programs, and recognized 15 Exemplary Initiatives. This diverse and exciting group of organizations includes innovative foster care agencies; college-based support programs; a drop-in center; a summer camp; a teen parenting program; and youth advisory boards. The Youth Thrive Exemplary Initiatives became a rich source of ideas and strategies, as well as an informal think tank and sounding board for programs and for the overall Youth Thrive initiative.
- **We created the Youth Thrive Framework, built on research, to provide a new, clear, and compelling way to think about what youth need in order to thrive.** The Framework applies to older children, teenagers, and young adults and is relevant to all youth between the ages of 9 and 26 years old.



At the heart of the Framework are five Protective and Promotive Factors that mitigate risk and promote youth well-being:

THE YOUTH THRIVE PROTECTIVE AND PROMOTIVE FACTORS

	<p>Knowledge of Adolescent Development: Understanding the unique aspects of adolescence and implementing policies and practices that reflect a deep understanding of development.</p>
	<p>Youth Resilience: Managing stress and functioning well when faced with stressors, challenges, or adversity.</p>
	<p>Concrete Support in Times of Need: Making sure youth receive quality, equitable, and respectful services that meet their basic needs (e.g., health care, housing, education, nutrition, income), and teaching youth to ask for help and advocate for themselves.</p>
	<p>Social Connections: Having healthy, sustained relationships with people, institutions, the community, and a force greater than oneself that promotes a sense of trust, belonging, and that one matters.</p>
	<p>Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence: Acquiring skills and attitudes that are essential to forming an independent, positive identity and having a productive and satisfying adulthood.</p>

Youth Thrive Timeline

2010

- Received grant



2012

- Created Youth Thrive Video on the Five Protective and Promotive Factors
- Youth Thrive Framework adopted by New Jersey, the first state to implement the framework



2013

- Youth Thrive Framework adopted by Brevard County, FL, becoming the second Youth Thrive site
- Conducted national search for initiatives that exemplify Youth Thrive values and approach
- Selected and recognized 15 Exemplary Initiatives

2015

- Compiled and posted online menu of strategies, tips, and tools for implementing Youth Thrive

2017

- Revised [Youth Thrive Training Curriculum](#) to include additional content on race, racism, and bias from the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity
- Created and disseminated [Understanding Youth Thrive: A Tip Sheet for Family Court Partners](#)
- Completed and piloted [Families Thrive Curriculum](#) that covers children and youth of all ages.
- Published [Transformational Relationships for Youth Success](#) report
- Held Putting Ideas into Action Conference for Youth Thrive National Network



2018

- Developed, field tested, and disseminated a validated self-assessment [Survey Tool](#) for youth based on the five Protective and Promotive Factors



2011

- Completed research scan
- Developed initial Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors Framework
- Integrated Youth Thrive Framework (for older children and adolescents) with the Strengthening Families Framework (for infants, toddlers, and young children)
- Created Youth Thrive name and logo
- Vetted Framework with youth, researchers, and practitioners



2014

- Published research-based briefs for each Protective and Promotive Factor
- Convened national conference of 15 Exemplary Initiatives/ other partners
- Published articles in [Fostering Families](#) and the [Journal on Child and Youth Work](#)
- Completed and piloted [Youth Thrive Training of Trainers](#) curriculum
- Received second grant for Youth Thrive
- Published research synthesis, [Youth Thrive: Advancing Healthy Adolescent Development and Well-Being](#)



2016

- Held competitive application process and selected five sites to implement Youth Thrive: Georgia, Vermont, Nebraska, New York City, and Westchester, NY
- Launched Learning Community, a national network with seven jurisdictions, other partners, and allies
- Completed and shared [Resiliency Training Module](#)
- Convened Youth Thrive Learning Community at national conference



2019

- Created and piloted [Youth Thrive 4 Youth](#), a training developed by and for young people
- Established [Youth Thrive U](#), a national network for Youth Thrive and Families Thrive trainers
- Completed and shared a training module on [Cognitive and Social Emotional Competencies](#)
- Piloted [Youth Thrive Coaching Tool](#) with New Jersey providers
- Held Youth Thrive #SeeChange national network convening
- Wrote [Youth Thrive: Our Story \(So Far\)](#)
- Produced new [Youth Thrive video](#)

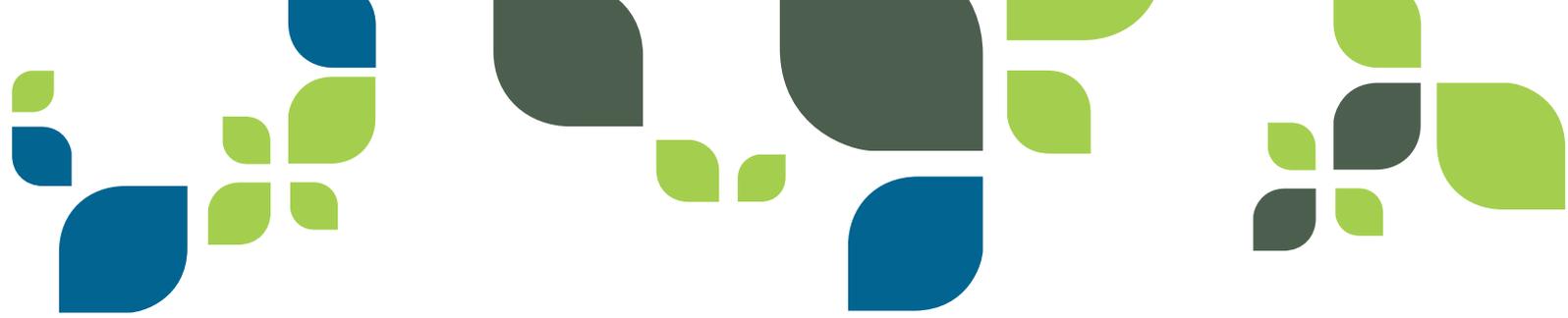


- **We invited jurisdictions to become part of a Youth Thrive learning community and partnered with seven locales** specifically:

- » New York City Department of Probation
- » New Jersey Department of Children and Families
- » Georgia Department of Human Services
- » Nebraska Children and Families Foundation
- » Vermont Department of Children Services and the Coalition on Runaway and Homeless Youth
- » Westchester County Department of Social Services (in New York)
- » Brevard Family Partnership (in Florida)

These sites volunteered to incorporate the Youth Thrive Framework in agency policy, programming, practice, and training of staff and to share their experiences and insights. While they did not receive any funding from CSSP to implement Youth Thrive, their partnership with Youth Thrive did afford them a number of significant opportunities, including: team participation in national meetings with peers and other partners; extensive training of trainers and curriculum materials and supports; technical assistance responsive to site specific needs; and development of other resources, such as the Youth Thrive Survey assessment tool. All Youth Thrive sites had already made a commitment to reform their systems that serve youth and had some capacity to implement changes. Examples of their accomplishments are described in the following pages.

- **We centered equity in all Youth Thrive activities.** In keeping with CSSP's overall mission to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society, Youth Thrive has always sought to keep equity as a primary pillar of all our work. We have done this by:
 - » Partnering with the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University to share information about implicit bias and the impact of structural racism on youth well-being with our Youth Thrive network.
 - » Revising the Youth Thrive training curriculum content to increase attention to issues of race, racism, and bias and adding research findings that demonstrated the impact of bias and discrimination on youth well-being.
 - » Confering with Professor Khalil Gibran Muhammad of the Harvard Kennedy School and Nat Kendall-Taylor of the Frameworks Institute to re-examine Youth Thrive and develop a new, anti-racist narrative about youth. Their insights led us to strengthen the Youth Thrive narrative by increasing attention to how public agencies and the larger environments too often harm and impede youth's progress. Too many descriptions and presentation about youth start with negative information and often blame young people themselves. We are trying to not to use 'damage imagery' that puts the onus of larger failings of systems and society back on individuals.



- **We partnered with youth, young adults, and young professionals who have lived experience in child welfare and juvenile justice** to ensure that all Youth Thrive work values and reflects their perspectives. Youth Thrive has greatly benefited from these youth advisors—called the Youth Thrive Ambassadors. They reviewed Youth Thrive materials and documents, co-facilitated trainings and workshops, participated and presented at national meetings, and provided invaluable advice and feedback on many issues.
- **We developed and shared a host of resources for implementing Youth Thrive** based on feedback from our learning community of sites and partners. Specific training resources include:
 - » **Youth Thrive Training of Trainers curriculum and modules:** a comprehensive curriculum and supporting materials developed in collaboration with the National Resource Center for Youth Services and the Academy for Competent Youth Work. It is packed with relevant information and engaging activities and organized by the five Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors. This Training of Trainers curriculum offers three to four days of intensive information and education process for experienced trainers who can then hold staff trainings on Youth Thrive.
 - » **Resilience Module:** a module that provides youth workers with tools and easy-to-implement activities that can be used in their programs and professional practice to support young people in developing resilience skills.
 - » **Cognitive and Social Emotional Development Module:** provides youth workers with information and tools that can be used in their programs and professional practice to support young people in developing cognitive and social-emotional skills.



- » **Families Thrive Training:** combines content from Strengthening Families, a Protective Factors Framework for young children (birth through age 8), and Youth Thrive to cover the full child developmental continuum.
- » **Youth Thrive 4 Youth:** an interactive, accessible and engaging training curriculum created by and for youth.
- » **Launched Youth Thrive U:** a national support network for people, teaching, and training.
- **Other Youth Thrive Materials include:**
 - » **Building the Youth Thrive Framework in Jurisdictions:** a resource that sets out expectations, guiding questions, stages, and levers for making changes within jurisdictions adopting the Youth Thrive approach.
 - » **Youth Thrive Tip Sheet for Family Court Partners:** a roadmap for Family Court Partners to enhance conversations and planning by professionals who appear in family court proceedings with young people about their journey toward healthy adulthood.
 - » **Transformational Relationships for Youth Success research and report:** this resource identifies a group of organizations doing extraordinary work with young people in difficult circumstances and found that many of them focus intently on relationships between workers and youth. These documented relationships were found to be at the heart of change
 - » **Youth Thrive Supervisory Coaching Tool:** reinforces training content, promotes program and practice change, and gives supervisors lots of ideas for helping workers apply Youth Thrive with youth.
 - » **Youth Thrive Self-Assessment Survey Instrument:** a valid, reliable, web-based instrument that measures the presence, strength, and growth of the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors. Co-designed with youth and young adults and taking less than 15 minutes to complete, the survey can be used in case planning and practice, evaluation, and continuous quality improvement.
 - » **Youth Thrive Video:** a 7-minute video that features youth and young adults defining the five Protective Factors and sharing examples from their own experiences.





CHANGING SYSTEMS, SERVICES, AND SUPPORTS SO THAT ALL YOUTH CAN SUCCEED

THE YOUTH THRIVE FRAMEWORK HAS BEEN USED BY PUBLIC AGENCIES TO EXAMINE ALL ASPECTS OF THEIR OPERATIONS AND IDENTIFY WAYS THEY CAN DO A BETTER JOB FOR ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

Over the past four years, Youth Thrive worked with seven child welfare and juvenile justice systems to help them make changes in their policies and practice that reflect and respond to the dynamics of adolescent development. These child welfare and juvenile justice agencies are committed to giving young people in their care the necessary supports and opportunities they need to handle challenges and build strengths. Based on our experience with these sites and several other partners, we are highlighting four areas where change has been most impactful:

1. Understanding Adolescent Development
2. Training
3. Youth Voice
4. Agency Culture

1. CHANGE THROUGH UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

When caseworkers, supervisors, and other staff learn about adolescent development, it positively and significantly impacts how they interact with young people, their families, and each other. For instance, when people learn that the part of the brain that governs decisionmaking, abstract thinking, and problem solving is not fully developed until around age 26, they are often able to be more patient and insightful about the inconsistent and, at times, perplexing decisions that youth make. Similarly, when workers learn that despite the impact of trauma on brain development, research shows that positive experiences can create new pathways in the brain that help youth heal and progress, they are less pessimistic about a young person's prospects and often much more energized to find those new opportunities for growth and less focused on past problems. During Youth Thrive training, there are many of these "aha! moments." These insights lead to action: workers find new ways to offer support, to speak and listen so that youth feel understood, and to encourage youth to take positive risks.

Accomplishments in Applying Understanding Adolescent Development:

- **Brevard Family Partnership** uses a youth profile called "All About Me" to make more appropriate foster care placement matches. To reduce the sense of the unknown when youth are moved to a new home, Brevard shares foster parent profiles with youth in advance. Helping prepare youth for their next steps is not only developmentally necessary, but is also valuable for adolescents



who need and want to be meaningfully engaged in thinking about their future. It has helped youth navigate their situation and circumstances and has provided an opportunity for them to be ready for upcoming changes and new relationships.

- **Georgia Division of Family and Children Services** used the Youth Thrive Framework to educate decisionmakers about the importance of extending foster care up to age 21, which led to a change in State legislative policy. They have also used the Framework to guide further policy development—creating one of the first state reports on adolescent brain development and how it advances ways its staff promote youth well-being.
- **Nebraska Juvenile Justice Association** now includes Youth Thrive language that addresses adolescent brain development in its contracts with partner organizations and agencies. The state of **Vermont** also added language in its contracts that services should align with and build the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors.
- **New Jersey's Department of Children and Families (DCF)** recognized an urgent need to improve services for youth in its child welfare system in response to a new understanding of adolescent development and new research findings documenting poor outcomes for youth in foster care. The Department elevated its Office of Adolescent Services (OAS) and prioritized work with adolescents and young adults, including youth aging out of the foster care system. The Office of Adolescent Services was an early adopter of the Youth Thrive Framework to help shape its work with youth.
- **New Jersey** changed how it helps youth plan for their transition out of care by putting youth in the driver's seat. Their new Transitional Plan for YOUth Success actively engages youth in identifying their strengths and interests and setting short and long-term goals with clear, measurable steps and timeframes. Support needs related to health, education, housing, employment, transition skills, and relationships are addressed in the plan, as is the option of setting a 'new path' when goals change.
- **Vermont**, as part of growing recognition of the importance of adolescent development within the state, has passed legislation that ensures that youth in foster care are able to participate in "normal" adolescent activities like driving, sleepovers, and extra-curricular programs.

"The greatest examples of culture change come when people start asking, 'How can we get youth to tell us what we should be doing?' That is when I feel like Youth Thrive is really working."

MATT WOLF, YOUTH IN TRANSITION PROGRAM
DIRECTOR, VERMONT FEDERATION OF FAMILIES FOR
CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

2. CHANGE THROUGH TRAINING

To bring a deeper understanding of adolescent development and its implications for working with youth, Youth Thrive developed a comprehensive training curriculum in collaboration with the National Resource Center for Youth Services at the University of Oklahoma and the Academy for Competent Youth Work.



The focus of the training is for all staff who have direct contact with young people—caseworkers, youth workers, supervisors, service providers, and probation, school resource, and police officers—to not only learn about adolescence, but to also understand how to apply that new knowledge in all aspects of their interactions with youth. The training provides workers with a solid understanding of the experiences and opportunities youth need in order to thrive and how they can act on that understanding. Thousands of direct services workers, supervisors and youth advocates have been trained on the Youth Thrive Framework and how to recognize and support protective and promotive factors in youth. Youth Thrive trainings have been held in dozens of states with representatives from hundreds of agencies and organizations and work with young people in communities across the country.

We recognize that training is necessary but not sufficient alone for making and sustaining practice change. For this reason, Youth Thrive develops and disseminates supervision and coaching tools, case planning, and other resources to reinforce use of training content in day-to-day practice.

Accomplishments in Training:

- **In Vermont**, the Youth Thrive Coordination Team—a state-level collaboration of various state agencies and non-profit organizations—committed to make Youth Thrive the standard of practice for anyone who works with young adults in the state. They started with the people who have the most frequent contact with youth and promoted ongoing information through additional, follow-up trainings. Vermont is seeking to build and support “communities of practice” in local regions of the state where providers can get together regularly to share information, plan, and discuss progress using Youth Thrive concepts, language, and principles.
- **The New York City Department of Probation, Juvenile Division** has trained all of its probation workers in Youth Thrive. Guided by the Youth Thrive Framework, they now ask youth about their strengths and social connections and work with youth to develop a plan to manage their lives in a way that keeps them out of the justice system. The Department has initiated a case consultation process where probation officers present cases to their colleagues to generate ideas on how they can more fully apply the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors into their everyday practice with young people.

“People who work with youth are hungry for information that can enhance that work. As a result of the Youth Thrive training, more of Nebraska’s youth are being served in a positive way across the state.”

JASON FELDHAUS, ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT,
NEBRASKA CHILDREN’S PROJECT EVERLAST EXPANSION

“The best way to keep youth in the juvenile justice system from entering the adult system is to give them a vision of their best self and the supports they need to manage their lives and succeed. Youth Thrive is driving a culture change that will prompt systems change to help us get to that goal.”

COMMISSIONER ANA BERMÚDEZ, NEW YORK CITY
DEPARTMENT OF PROBATION

- **New Jersey Department of Children and Families** has “Jersey-fied” the Youth Thrive curriculum by adapting it to the specifics of their state. It is now a core component of the state’s child welfare training program, regularly offered by a consortium of universities and co-led by young professionals who have had experience with child welfare and/or youth services. New Jersey has trained over 2,000 caseworkers and service providers in Youth Thrive. They have also developed a Youth Thrive home correspondence course for resource families (foster parents) and have expanded their youth certification training to include a focus on Youth Thrive.
- In **Nebraska**, trainers introduced service providers to the Youth Thrive Framework through a grassroots effort. More than 1,100 workers throughout the state—primarily in community-based and school settings—have received Youth Thrive training. Interest in the training grew as word spread of its positive implications for helping older youth build resiliency. The University of Nebraska at Lincoln has trained its faculty in the Office of Student Affairs and the Multicultural Center and trained their cadre of well-being coaches and students who are charged with supporting and reaching out to other students.
- Nebraska’s **Children’s and Families Foundation** is implementing a new training, called Families Thrive, that combines Youth Thrive with Strengthening Families, CSSP’s companion Protective Factors Framework focusing on families with young children (birth through age 8). Families Thrive covers the full age spectrum and is particularly useful for working with teen parents.
- Located in St. Louis, the **Wyman Center’s** goal is to empower teens to achieve educational success. In 2017, Wyman provided training to St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department officers, adapting the Youth Thrive curriculum for law enforcement-focused trainees. Participating officers, representing a wide variety of professional experiences and assignments within the Department, worked to develop a foundation of strong skills to proactively and positively engage with youth. Officers took part in activities and learning sessions to improve the quality of interactions between police and

“The Youth Thrive Framework has really helped to ground and inform New Jersey’s youth-related policy, practice, training, and programming efforts. It has served as a guide and a map that helps us to better understand what is happening for young people at this critical developmental stage so we can more holistically meet their needs as they transition to adulthood. Youth Thrive has broadened our lens, helping us to think well beyond making sure youth just have ‘life skills’ to ensuring that youth have a variety of supports, skills, relationships, and resources in place during this time of great growth and change.”

JESSICA TROMBETTA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADOLESCENT SERVICES, NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

“New Jersey created a new transitional plan that youth fill out with their caseworker. The Youth Thrive framework is embedded in the plan, so it is based on what youth want to see within their lives and their goals. It talks about identifying concrete supports in times of need, and it talks about their social connections. They think about who is the person who can help them with life skills, who can help them with their goals. The young person really takes the lead in creating the plan, rather than the caseworker creating the plan for the youth.”

KAYSIE GETTY, YOUTH THRIVE AMBASSADOR

success. In 2017, Wyman provided training to St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department officers, adapting the Youth Thrive curriculum for law enforcement-focused trainees. Participating officers, representing a wide variety of professional experiences and assignments within the Department, worked to develop a foundation of strong skills to proactively and positively engage with youth. Officers took part in activities and learning sessions to improve the quality of interactions between police and



youth, allowing for the long-term development of healthy relationships between the police department and communities to ultimately reduce youth violence in the city of St. Louis.

- **The Youth Thrive 4 Youth (YT4Y)** training was created in 2019 in collaboration with a group of young professionals with lived expertise in the child welfare and other youth-serving systems. YT4Y is an interactive, accessible, and engaging curriculum for youth themselves (ages 9 to 26) that provides them with an opportunity to better understand what they are going through developmentally and what helps to promote their healing, health, and well-being. The eight hours of training can be done in one full day or several shorter workshops and uses the Youth Thrive Framework as its foundation. YT4Y is organized around the five Protective and Promotive Factors.

3. CHANGE THROUGH YOUTH VOICE

Too often, youth entangled in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and homeless systems are not encouraged to raise issues that are important to them. In fact, youth often feel silenced, disrespected, or just worn out from too many providers. Youth Thrive is working to change that dynamic, so youth feel invited to speak up about their needs, and the people who work with them hear them without judgment and act on their priorities.

Encouraging youth voice means not only ensuring that youth can navigate their own individual paths, but also providing forums for youth to advise on broader program decisions and agency policies that impact all youth served. Several of the Youth Thrive sites are pioneers and national leaders in engaging with young people who have lived experience in foster care. When youth speak out and advocate for their needs, they can be forces for wider system and societal change. Within Youth Thrive, young people have stepped up to take on a variety of roles such as: leading training sessions; reviewing and commenting on draft documents, materials, and tools; advocating for policy changes; making presentations; participating in site visits; shaping funding requests and more.

Accomplishments in Youth Voice:

- **Georgia EmpowerMEnt**, a Youth Thrive partner and Jim Casey Youth Opportunity site, holds workshops and other forums to teach youth how to advocate for themselves in court hearings. EmpowerMEnt also hosts town halls where youth can express their opinions and reaches out to elected officials at Capital Day and other political events. Their calls for changes in policies include: making it easier for youth to get their drivers licenses; reducing reliance on psychotropic drugs; highlighting the problem of homelessness among transitioning youth; and promoting racial equity in the foster care system. EmpowerMEnt, with support from

“Youth Thrive is committed to re-imagining systems that help youth thrive not just survive. We envision child welfare, juvenile justice, and homeless agencies responding to young people’s needs, helping them heal, setting high expectations, providing opportunities, and nurturing their dreams. Our goal is to figure out how best to translate new research on adolescent development into systems and programs that build on youth strengths. And above all, how all of that leads to youth having joy and fulfillment in their lives.”

SUSAN NOTKIN, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT,
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY

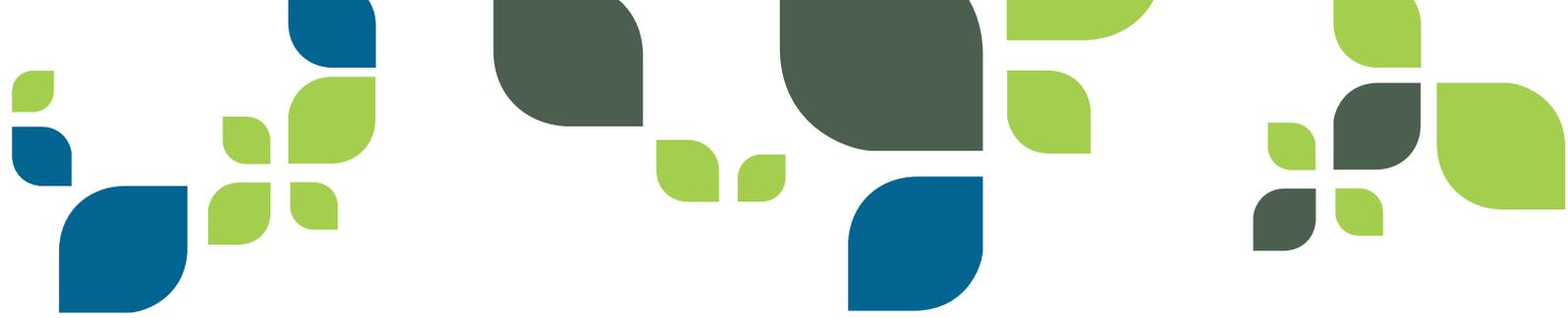
Youth Thrive, has also trained their young leaders in effective methods for organizing and advocating for change.

- **Brevard Family Partnership** created the Youth Leadership Academy to train young leaders in leadership development, teamwork and advocacy skills. Out of this training, the Partnership has created a **Youth Leadership Council** to strengthen “youth voice and choice” in influencing change in foster care policy and practice. The Council has identified four priorities for improving the foster care system:
 - 1) increase the number of quality foster homes that can provide specialized care and permanency;
 - 2) promote and advocate for more normalcy for youth in the system of care;
 - 3) increase the number of mentors/supportive adults for youth in care; and,
 - 4) build capacity for youth to successfully transition to independence.The Youth Leadership Council partners with the Brevard Youth Thrive Action Committee (part of the overall Partnership) to act on these four priorities, and together, youth and supportive adults are working to implement and sustain these and other youth-driven changes in policy and practice.
- In **Westchester**, Youth Thrive partners with Bravehearts, a pioneering organization in promoting youth voice and choice. A self-help organization, **Bravehearts** was founded by two young leaders who had previously been in foster care. Its mission is to empower young adults touched by the child welfare and juvenile justice systems to become active and

“We’ve totally changed how we interact with youth, starting with their intake form. It used to start with just the facts: name, social security, address. Now, we changed the first question to: ‘How can we help you?’ Because of Youth Thrive, youth-serving workers are now creating connections with youth, so youth feel heard and together they can take action to improve their lives.”

JASON FELDHAUS, ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT,
NEBRASKA CHILDREN’S PROJECT EVERLAST EXPANSION





authentic leaders in their own lives as they transition into adulthood. At weekly motivational meetings and other self-help activities, Bravehearts work with youth to change the conversation from “victim to victor.” They use their voices of experience to serve as experts in shaping innovative, strength-based, youth-driven services that promote healing, hope and opportunities. Young leaders from Bravehearts are consistently included in Westchester County Department of Social Services planning and decisionmaking meetings, and have influenced planning and implementation of a federally funded, competitively awarded Youth At Risk of Homelessness grant.

- **Bravehearts** is now collaborating with Youth Thrive on a new initiative to improve the court process and identify policy changes that are priorities of and for youth in care. Specifically, they are piloting two systems changes: 1) a new process to **better match aftercare workers with young people exiting care** and 2) adding **Peer Court Liaisons** who have experience in foster care to help young people negotiate family court and obtain needed services. The family court in Westchester has implemented the Peer Court Liaison model, and the County has adopted the Bravehearts recommendation regarding matching of youth with aftercare workers.

4. CHANGE THROUGH AGENCY CULTURE

It takes many steps, many different committed champions, and many years of concerted effort to change agency culture and achieve sustainable systems change. Youth Thrive sites are putting into place a range of strategies geared toward transforming their systems which include: having a leadership team that embraces a new way of working with youth; building new competencies of staff through training and new supervisory practices; changing policy and contracts; re-directing resources toward services that match what youth need; and making efforts to use data to drive decision making. In 2018, CSSP launched the Youth Thrive Survey, a validated and reliable assessment instrument that measures the presence, strength, and growth of a youth’s Protective and Promotive Factors (as reported by the youth). We hope this survey instrument, combined with an ongoing review of administrative data, will help agencies measure the changes in youth experiences and outcomes, the progress of Youth Thrive, and other related improvement efforts.

There are important qualitative indicators of culture change, such as different and consistent positive language being used and examples of programmatic changes, including new case planning processes that engage and value youth. We recognize much work still needs to be done to improve the capacity of systems, policymakers, and advocates and to know whether Youth Thrive and other innovations are positively impacting youth outcomes.

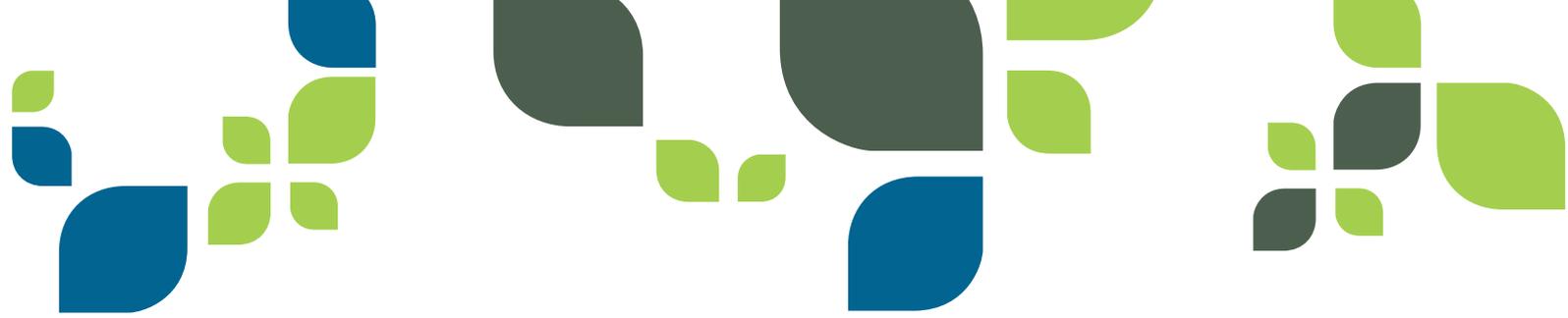
“Agency leadership and staff have a perception that young people are loud, boisterous, immature and problematic. When they work with our youth leaders, they get a different picture. We have been able to teach them a different way to do things and to build trust between agency staff and youth.”

JESSICA GRIMM, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
BRAVEHEARTS

Accomplishments in Culture Change:

- The **New York City Department of Probation, Juvenile Division**, has introduced several reforms that recognize the value and importance of youth having a significant say in their own probation plan. Its 127 probation workers have been trained in Youth Thrive. The relationship between the probation officer and the young person is increasingly viewed as an opportunity to facilitate positive change. With support from the Commissioner and senior leadership, the Department is using Youth Thrive to provide the language or “scaffolding” that supports this culture shift.
- Youth Thrive concepts are now included in the **Department of Probation’s Individual Action Plans**—the cornerstone of its planning process with young people—as well as the agency’s new ongoing case consultation process. The Department sees the Youth Thrive Framework as a critical resource for helping youth build self-efficacy, so that they have the skills to avail themselves of support systems, stay on course, and prevent re-entry into the justice system. Probation officers report changes in their clients’ behaviors, how they carry themselves, and how they react to adversity.
- In **Vermont**, Youth Thrive language is being incorporated into youth serving provider grants and contracts (and sub-grants/sub-contracts), requests for proposals, and state policies. One long-term goal is to integrate the Youth Thrive Framework into additional organizations, agencies and departments that serve a broader youth population.
- Both the **New Jersey** and **Westchester** Youth Thrive sites are recipients of the federal Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) grants, which are competitively awarded planning and implementation funds to six sites across the country. The goal of YARH is to decrease the risk of future homelessness for youth who have been in the foster care system and improve education, employment, and well-being for young adults.
 - » Targeting three counties, New Jersey is using YARH funds, supplemented with state housing vouchers, to help older youth who are at highest risk for future homelessness to make successful transitions to permanent housing. Their **Connect to Home** initiative uses the Youth Thrive Framework and training to identify and support permanent, positive lasting connections to family members and other caring adults.
 - » With YARH funds, Westchester Building Futures launched its **BraveLife Initiative** using trained peer navigators—young people with lived experience in the child welfare system—to engage, empower, and connect youth in order to improve outcomes. BraveLife navigators are also trained in the Youth Thrive curriculum.

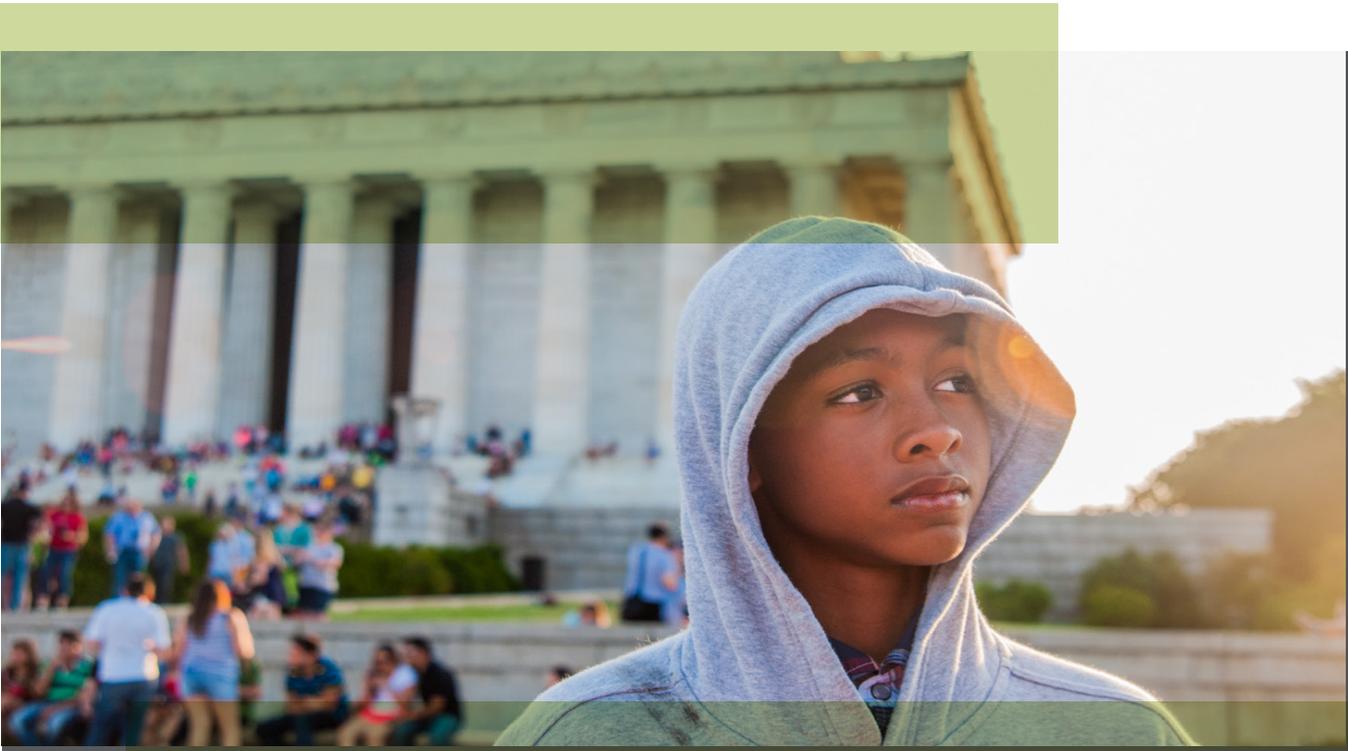
“The justice system is built on suppressing voices. When you go to court, youth can’t talk, except to their lawyer. When you are a teenager, developmentally, you are dying to break out, to have a say and have control over your life. Probation should not be a time to continue to suppress their voice. It’s about approaching people from the possibility of their best self. If you can do that, that is the best way of keeping people from re-entering the system—because they will have a vision of themselves that is better than being stuck in the system. To me, it is a moral imperative, a system imperative, a human imperative.”
ANA BERMÚDEZ, COMMISSIONER,
NYC DEPARTMENT OF PROBATION



- **Nebraska** workers across the state are using knowledge they have learned from Youth Thrive to create a consistent language on how to talk about and with youth. Agency forms and contracts have been updated to be more sensitive to young people’s needs and invite more authentic engagement with youth.
- **Georgia** has a major statewide initiative underway to increase education achievement and graduation rates for youth in foster care. They are using the Youth Thrive Framework to establish benchmarks in their education service delivery contract with the Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC), a youth advocacy and empowerment organization (MAAC is also a Youth Thrive Exemplary Initiative).
- Youth Thrive has developed a **Supervisory Coaching Tool** to reinforce Youth Thrive training content and integrate the Framework into on-going practice with youth, their families and other connections. Piloted and revised by a group of experienced supervisors in **New Jersey**, the Coaching Tool gives supervisors ideas for helping workers apply Youth Thrive content in youth-serving programs. It helps operationalize the commitment that partnering with youth to elicit and strengthen their “voice and choice” is necessary for effective engagement, assessments, goal setting and planning to help youth thrive.

“I grew up in foster care and grew up to be an advocate for youth in New Jersey. I started by joining a Youth Advisory Board and was eventually asked to be a member of the Helping Youth Thrive in Placement Task Force by the director of the Office of Adolescent Services. We used the Youth Thrive framework to look at what’s happening and gave input on topics like youth stipends and setting case goals. I was also involved in interviewing and hiring decisions for new staff. I’ve taken what I have learned and my leadership skills to the national level through the National Foster Youth and Alumni Policy Council and work with NYTD (National Youth In Transition Database).”

KAYSIE GETTY, NEW JERSEY
YOUTH THRIVE AMBASSADOR



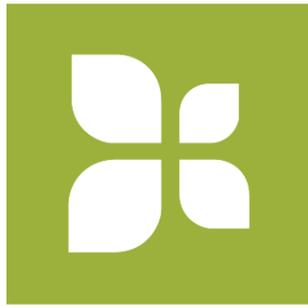
YOUTH THRIVE: LOOKING AHEAD

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH OUR PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARTNER AGENCIES OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS HAS DEMONSTRATED THE VARIETY OF CREATIVE EFFORTS THAT SYSTEMS CAN BE MORE ALIGNED WITH WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US YOUTH NEED TO THRIVE.

This work has been both humbling and inspirational. It has reinforced that more attention is needed to help agencies concentrate on improving their practice with youth and that more work is needed to ensure that youth never enter these intervening systems in the first place. Consequently, as we look forward to the next three years, we have decided to focus our efforts in these two complimentary directions. First, based on what we have learned about changing practice in our sites and in our Exemplary Initiatives, combined with an exhaustive scan of the youth-serving field, we will be compiling a Blueprint for Practice Change that will represent the most up-to-date compendium of practice strategies for transforming agency practice.

Second, we recognize that no matter how much we improve youth experiences with these systems, we will always need to turn our attention to ensuring that youth never enter these intervening systems in the first place. It is our job as a society to ensure that we devote time, attention, and resources towards helping youth thrive in their communities, schools, and families. Starting in 2020, we will be working with national and local partners, parents, youth, educators, and service providers to identify opportunities that weave together schools, afterschool providers, local businesses, faith communities, parents, and youth themselves in building communities where all youth can thrive.

While this is a very large undertaking, we will not be doing it alone. Our partners in communities—and young people themselves—will be right there with us every step of the way. Together, we will bring what we have learned from applying Youth Thrive in systems to this range of stakeholders so that we are creating youth-friendly communities committed to all youth thriving.



Youth Thrive

An initiative of CSSP

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