



Alameda County's Youth Transitions Partnership Program

November 2020

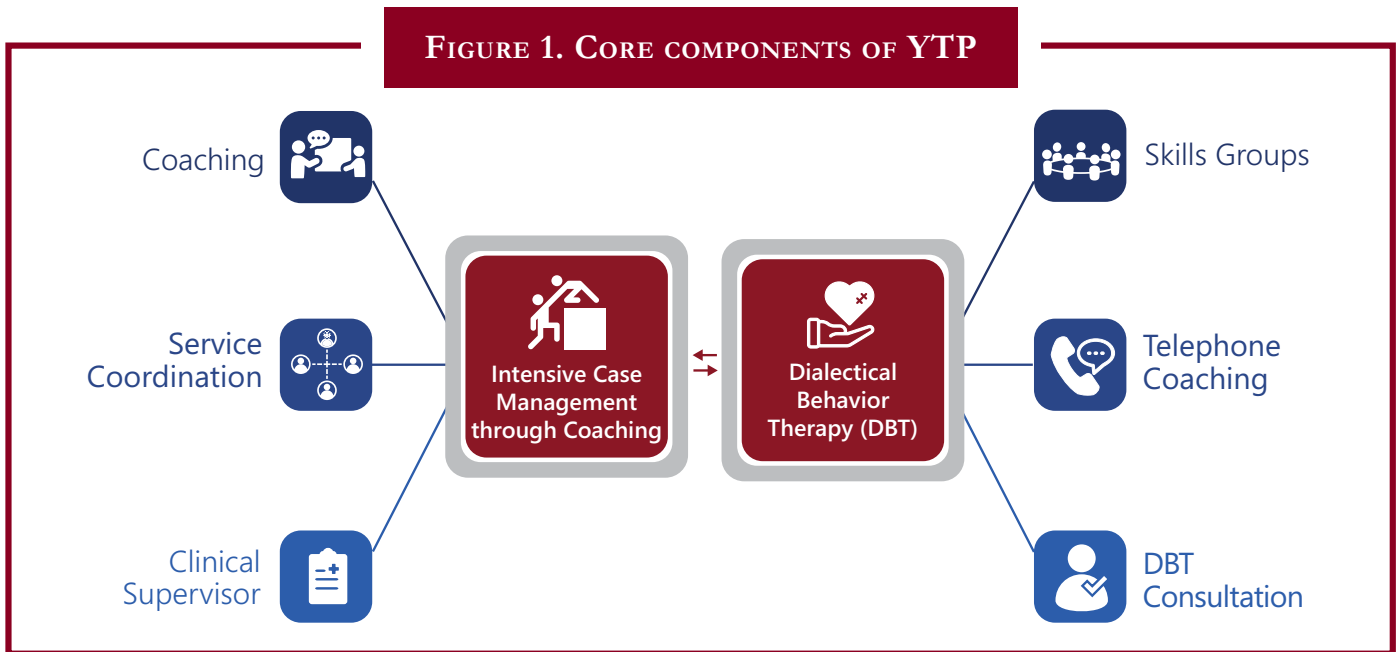
A Practical Example of Using CQI to Support Successful Program Implementation

YTP provides a concrete example of using a CQI process to support early program implementation.

As a grantee under the Children's Bureau's Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) grant program (see Box 1), the Alameda County (California) Social Services Agency (SSA) developed and implemented the Youth Transitions Partnership (YTP). YTP is an innovative model of service coordination, intensive case management, and individualized supports, including dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), for transition-age youth in foster care. The aim of YTP is to increase young people's ability to engage with available support systems and thereby improve their outcomes. As part of a formative evaluation of YTP, Chapin Hall researchers used a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process to support its early implementation. This brief describes the YTP model, the CQI process that was used, and one of the ways in which YTP's implementation improved as a result.

YTP has two core components: intensive case management and DBT (see Figure 1). What makes YTP unique is this pairing of support from coaches with skill development through weekly DBT group attendance. Youth leverage the strong relationships they develop with their coaches to access services, achieve their goals, and gain the skills needed to persist in these endeavors even after their YTP participation ends. The program currently serves 14- to 20-year-olds who have multiple risk factors for experiencing homelessness and are placed in out-of-home care in Alameda County.¹

FIGURE 1. CORE COMPONENTS OF YTP



BOX 1: YOUTH AT-RISK OF HOMELESSNESS (YARH) GRANT PROGRAM



The Children’s Bureau, an office within the Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), is funding YARH, a multiphase grant program, to build the evidence base on what works to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system. Eighteen organizations received funding for the first phase of YARH, a 2-year planning grant (2013–2015). Six of those organizations received funding for the second phase, a 4-year initial implementation grant (2015–2019).

YARH focuses on three populations: (1) adolescents who enter foster care between ages 14 and 17, (2) young adults aging out of foster care, and (3) homeless youth/young adults up to age 21 with foster care histories. During the planning phase, grantees conducted data analyses to help them understand their local population and develop a comprehensive service model to improve outcomes in housing, education and training, social well-being, and permanent connections.

During the initial implementation phase, grantees refined and tested their comprehensive service model. They conducted usability testing to determine the feasibility of specific model elements and a formative evaluation to understand what supports and structures were needed to implement the model with fidelity. A third YARH phase will continue to provide important information to the field by supporting organizations from Phase II in evidence-building activities.

[For more information on YARH](#)

SSA partners with First Place for Youth (FPFY) - a nationally recognized provider of services to youth in foster care, which trains and supervises the YTP coaches - and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, which conducted a comprehensive formative evaluation of YTP. Chapin Hall continues to manage a robust CQI process to support YTP implementation and monitor fidelity to the model.² This brief describes the CQI process and how it was used to support YTP's early implementation. It also provides an example of how the YTP partners used the CQI process to increase program enrollment.

FOR MORE DETAILS ABOUT YTP AND ITS INITIAL OUTCOMES, SEE "[ALAMEDA COUNTY'S YOUTH TRANSITIONS PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM – A PROMISING MODEL FOR SUPPORTING TRANSITION-AGE YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE.](#)"

What is CQI?

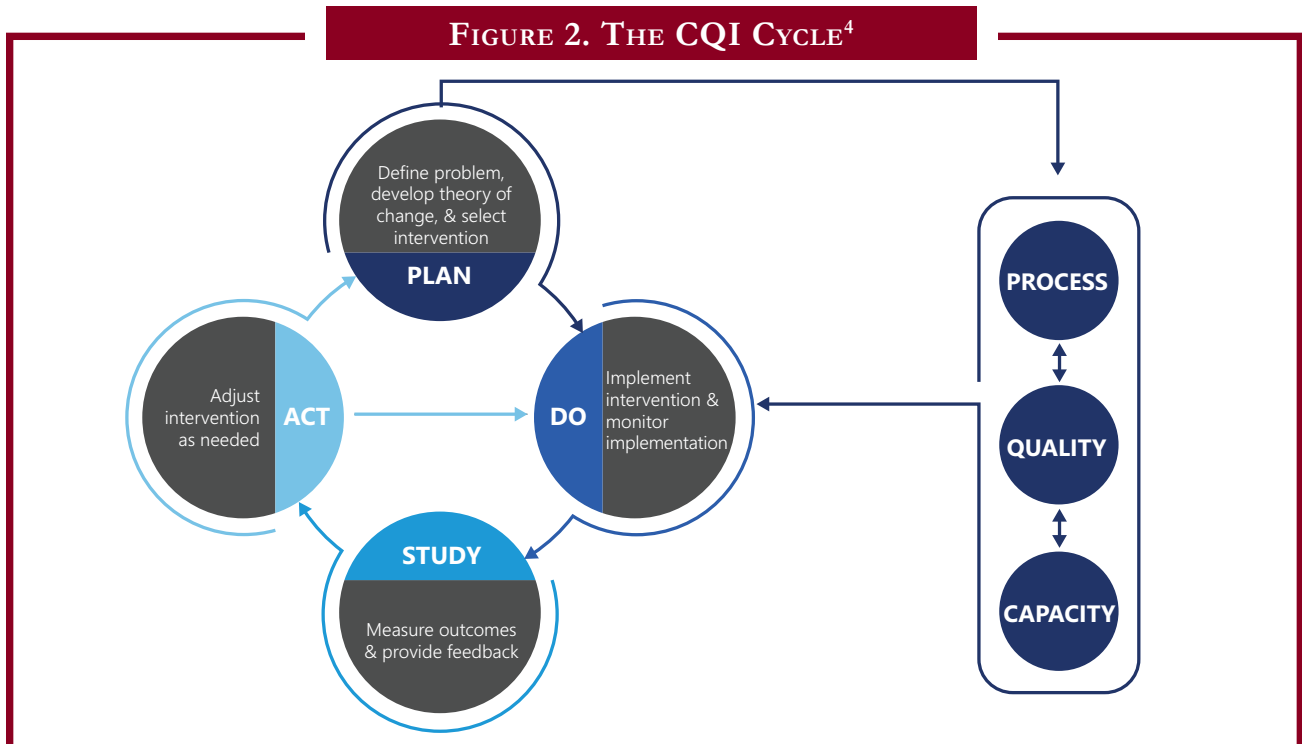
CQI is a cycle of problem-solving activities that requires the deliberate use of evidence to aid decision making about program improvements.³ This process focuses on four key phases: *Plan, Do, Study, Act* (see Figure 2).

Plan: Identify a problem, develop an evidence-supported theory of change, and select or design an intervention to address the identified problem. The theory of change should identify the root cause of the problem and explain how the intervention will address the problem by changing (1) how the work is done (*process*); (2) how well the work is done (*quality*); or (3) the resources that support the work (*capacity*).

Do: Implement and monitor the new intervention.

Study: Examine whether the intervention has had the intended effect.

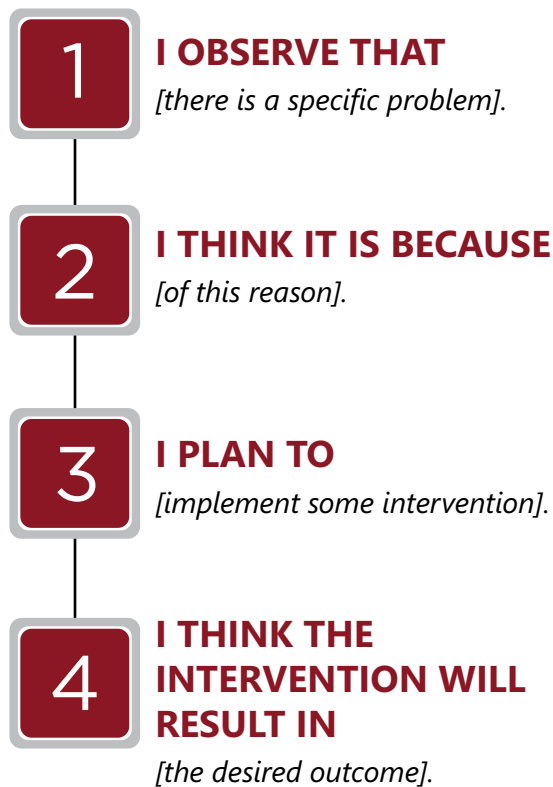
Act: Adjust the intervention as needed based on findings from the *Study* phase.



A core principle of CQI is developing and testing hypotheses based on the theory of change developed during the Plan stage. This theory of change features four essential claims (Figure 3).⁵

During the YARH planning process, YTP's theory of change began with an observation that many transition-age youth in foster care in Alameda County experience or are at risk for homelessness despite the existence of a rich array of services. Based on an extensive resource mapping project and interviews and focus groups with over 100 community members, SSA hypothesized that young people were not receiving the services they needed due to: (1) a lack of service coordination; (2) inconsistent pathways to services; and (3) barriers to initial and ongoing service engagement. YTP was designed to address these factors by blending service coordination, intensive case management, and individualized supports. Youth who participate in YTP are expected to reduce their risk for homelessness by acquiring skills, persisting in services, achieving goals, and improving their outcomes in four key areas: housing, education/employment, social-emotional well-being, and permanent connections.

FIGURE 3. FOUR ESSENTIAL CLAIMS OF A THEORY OF CHANGE



YTP's CQI Process




As YTP transitioned from the *Plan* phase into the *Do* phase of the CQI cycle, Chapin Hall created a CQI structure and embedded it in its formative evaluation of YTP. The Chapin Hall evaluation team managed the CQI process and engaged SSA and FPFY as full partners in monitoring implementation and progress toward goals in near real time. The CQI process ensured that the data needed for the formative evaluation were available, produced meaningful knowledge about the program, and informed ongoing changes to the program during the formative evaluation and beyond. These changes contributed to the program's successful implementation.

The central YTP CQI activity is a monthly 1-hour call, during which the partners review a dashboard of key program metrics related to implementation fidelity, participant engagement, and short-term outcomes. Chapin Hall creates the dashboard using data extracts from FPFY that are modified over time to meet new data needs. By using these data to generate metrics that are linked to the program's theory of change and logic model, the partners can assess whether YTP is being implemented as intended and identify areas in need of improvement. Chapin Hall also brings one or two additional topics of interest to the group each month for consideration.⁶

CQI Partner Strengths

Although the data and CQI dashboard are essential, the real backbone of YTP’s CQI process is the strong relationship between the partners, each of which brings a different set of expertise and strengths to in-depth, evidence-informed discussions about program implementation (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. PARTNER STRENGTHS

Alameda County SSA	First Place for Youth	Chapin Hall
		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program developer • Knowledge of county service context & administrative data • Strong evaluation team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program provider • Clinical expertise • Reliable program database 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formative evaluation lead • National CQI Expert • Expertise in processing & analyzing administrative data

Using CQI to Improve YTP Implementation

When YTP’s CQI process began in 2016, the CQI meetings focused on answering basic questions, such as, “How do youth come into the program?” and, “Are YTP services being delivered?” Having all the partners invested in working through the answers to these basic questions was crucial to being able to have productive, efficient, and meaningful discussions about more complex topics and being able to answer critical questions such as, “What does it mean for youth to be engaged?” and, “How will we know when youth are ready for graduation?”

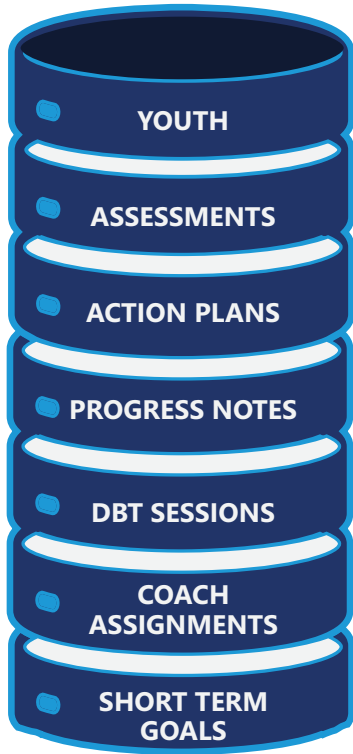
As YTP implementation progressed, the CQI process supported implementation monitoring, and the partners identified program components in need of improvement during their monthly review of the data dashboard (see the example below). Guided by small, implementation-focused theories of change, the partners tested adjustments to *process*, *quality*, and *capacity* elements of YTP’s program model to address areas in need of improvement.

MOVING FROM DATA TO EVIDENCE

Generating YTP's CQI Dashboard

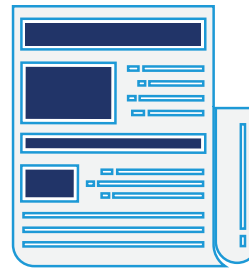
DATA EXTRACTS

Provided by FPFY monthly to Chapin Hall evaluation team. Extracts capture program data stored in FPFY's internal administrative database.



- Enrollment & exit dates
- Demographic information
- Child welfare history
- Protective & risk factors
- Housing situation
- Permanent connections
- Outcome rating scales in key domains
- Youth-led long term goals
- Coaching activity
- Service coordination
- Youth attendance
- Youth invited
- Attendance details
- Module information
- Coach assignment detail
- Goal dates
- Goal domain & detail
- Goal progress & completion

YTP YOUTH EVENT FILE



Data extracts are knitted together via unique youth and enrollment IDs to create a comprehensive event file which contains an observation for each "event" experienced by a youth over the course of their time in YTP.

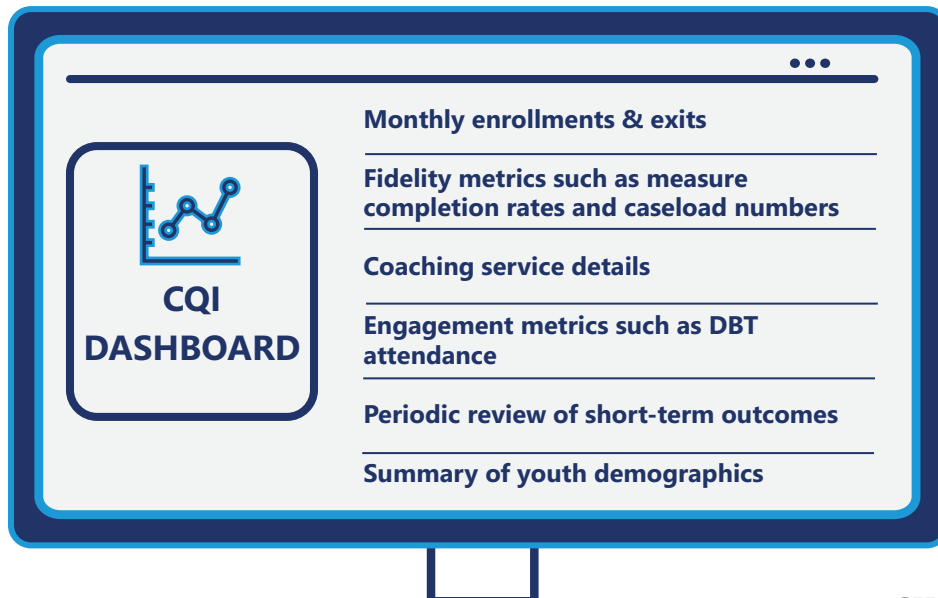
YTP YOUTH SPELL FILE



A spell file takes the event file and summarizes it at the youth level, creating one observation per youth, including variables that summarize their experience in YTP.

YTP CQI DASHBOARD

Each month, a CQI Dashboard of key program metrics is generated using the YTP youth event and spell files. Chapin Hall shares the dashboard with the CQI team prior to the monthly meeting.



A Practical Example: Understanding and Improving YTP Enrollment with CQI

Youth enroll in YTP after being identified as potentially eligible by a risk assessment, being contacted by SSA staff, and attending an enrollment meeting with a YTP coach. At the end of the first year of implementation, the CQI dashboard indicated that a key YTP process indicator—program enrollment—was lower than anticipated; an average of only one to two youth were enrolling each month. The partners discussed the challenges to enrolling youth in the program, and Chapin Hall worked with SSA to map the multiple pathways to enrollment. Chapin Hall also gathered qualitative data about YTP enrollment from child welfare workers, YTP coaches, program administrators, and youth participants to help determine whether the central problem was a *process*, *quality*, or *capacity* issue.

An analysis of those data identified three key enrollment challenges:

1. Youth could enroll in YTP through multiple pathways.

Youth could be identified as candidates for enrollment through the risk assessment or by their child welfare worker, if they had risk factors not captured by administrative data (e.g., parenting, domestic violence). Additionally, it can take several months for some youth who were identified as a candidate for enrollment to become interested in the program. During that time, enrollment staff needed to regularly check in with the youth.

2. Management of the enrollment process required consistent, daily communications.

Enrollment staff often had to reach out several times before successfully connecting with youth and their child welfare workers. Momentum could be lost if these connections were spaced too far apart. Additionally, the best way to connect with youth varied depending on their age and important relationships in their life. The best way to contact youth under age 18 was often through their resource parent; youth age 18 and older often preferred to be contacted directly.

3. Enrollment tracking did not generate the data needed to understand the enrollment process.

Although interviews and focus groups generated valuable information about YTP's enrollment process, many important questions (e.g., What proportion of youth did enrollment staff successfully contact? How long did it typically take for a youth to progress through the enrollment process? At which steps in the enrollment process were youth most likely to disengage?) could not be answered because the enrollment tracking tool did not capture the data needed to answer those questions.

Based on these findings, Chapin Hall, SSA, and FPFY hypothesized that more *capacity* was needed to navigate the complicated enrollment process and facilitate consistent *quality* communications with youth and their child welfare workers. When YTP was first implemented, the SSA YTP Coordinator was managing enrollment in addition to all her other job responsibilities. To address the capacity issue, a full-time YTP enrollment specialist was hired to manage the enrollment process. The enrollment specialist could focus exclusively on connecting with and enrolling youth. As a result, the average number of youth enrolled each month increased by 60% over the next year. The enrollment specialist also began tracking the date on which each key enrollment event occurred, which allowed Chapin Hall to conduct a more detailed analysis of enrollment in future periods.

THEORY OF CHANGE TO IMPROVE YTP ENROLLMENT

WE OBSERVED THAT

YTP enrollment was lower than anticipated.

WE THOUGHT IT WAS BECAUSE

there was not sufficient staffing capacity to facilitate quality communications during the enrollment process.

SO, WE PLANNED

to hire a full-time enrollment specialist to oversee youth enrollment and early engagement in YTP.

WHICH WE THOUGHT WOULD RESULT

in more consistent communications and more youth enrolling in YTP each month.

Summary

The CQI process presents an opportunity to build meaningful knowledge about program performance and support for the changes that are often essential for a successful implementation. It requires thoughtful, engaged partners with a shared understanding of CQI and theories of change which are supported by evidence based on high-quality data. The CQI process and the resulting program adaptations provide a strong foundation from which rigorous evaluation activities can be launched. Our best advice for others looking to implement interventions serving youth at risk for homelessness using a CQI process is to bring all partners to the table early, generate evidence from reliable data, and encourage regular, evidence-driven discussions among the partners from the start.

Acknowledgment and Disclaimer

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Special thanks to our partners at Alameda County Social Services Agency and First Place for Youth, without whom this work would not be possible. Additional thanks to the partners who devoted their time and attention to the YTP Leadership Team during the planning phase. Thanks also to the technical assistance team at Mathematica who provided guidance and assistance throughout the implementation process. Many thanks to the Center for State Child Welfare Data at Chapin Hall whose devotion to the rigorous study—and commitment to a common and accessible understanding—of evidence-based CQI helped form the foundation on which our YTP CQI practices were based. And finally, thanks to the multiple YTP partners, YTP coaches, child welfare workers, and youth who participated in focus groups and interviews during the formative evaluation.

The contents of this publication are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children’s Bureau, the Administration for Children and Families, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or any of Chapin Hall’s partners.

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