Young Adults Value Participation, Meaningful Employment, & Unconditional Caring

Tempo Young Adult Resource Center in Framingham, Massachusetts, offers comprehensive resources to transition-aged youth (ages 16-24) in an accessible, young adult-centered environment. Tempo grew out of a participatory planning process, and in its first two years, has honed its approach through an evaluation that has measured results and informed program development. Evaluation consisted of a participatory qualitative evaluation, and a collection of quantitative data on goal completion, supported by young adults' stories compiled into a video-documentary. All three evaluation components indicate that Tempo has exceeded expectations in helping transition-aged youth with greater-than-average challenges clear the hurdles to healthy, productive adulthood.

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING PROCESS

Tempo emerged from a locally-sponsored, inclusive needs assessment in Framingham, MA, a large town with retail and industrial activity, widespread poverty, and steady growth in immigrant groups, including Brazilians and Latinos. The 2006 assessment found that coordinated supports for young adults with mental health and substance abuse conditions were severely lacking. Young adults and family members described barriers such as: loss of mental health services at age 19, minimal outreach to non-English speakers, little attention to non-college career paths, adult services poorly suited to young adults, and few role models of successful transition to independence. Surveys of young adults verified concerns about the difficulties of finding and keeping employment at a living wage, and about the lack of behavioral health treatment oriented to young adults.

These data, along with additional young adult input, led to the establishment of Tempo. Thanks to the insights of young adults, Tempo incorporated such features as on-site laundry facilities, the use of social networking, and internships in its original design. Wayside Youth & Family Support Network (a mid-sized child welfare/mental health agency in Framingham) led four other collaborating agencies in realizing the resulting plan, funded in 2007 by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and a group of local partners.

WHAT IS TEMPO?

Tempo is a collaboration of five separate agencies providing resources for young adults in a single location. It is run by five Transition Facilitators who coach young adults through comprehensive planning and goal-setting and help them navigate the often confusing, fragmented community

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resources. The "one-stop" site ties together resources for career exploration, work-readiness and job search supports, access to housing for young adults, substance abuse recovery groups, legal assistance, access to benefits, young parent supports, and health assessments and screenings. Tempo has expanded access to resources for youth who were excluded from existing services due to narrow eligibility criteria. Tempo houses practical help as well, including a washer and dryer, a kitchen full of donated snacks, computers and phones to share, and a van for transportation to appointments.

Tempo provides resources to over 300 young adults per year, a third engaged in comprehensive planning with a Transition Facilitator, the others briefly involved, usually seeking employment. Most young adults who come to Tempo are facing significant challenges, including poverty, mental illness, homelessness, substance abuse, lack of a high school diploma, unemployment, a criminal record, lack of family support, and/or single parenthood. Thirty-nine percent of youth who came to Tempo last year were identified as living at or below the federal poverty level; another 46% were low-income. All were facing at least one and often several barriers: 105 had dropped out of school, 102 were court-involved, 42 were pregnant or parenting, 46 were homeless, and 15 were aging out of foster care.

Though Tempo is a welcoming house (decorated by youth), more welcoming still is the commitment to treat each youth with dignity, no matter how many times he or she makes missteps. For example, staff say that "young adults come to Tempo for resources" rather than "Tempo provides services to clients," placing young adults in the self-directed role of seeking out resources to reach their goals, rather than passively receiving help. Small changes in language represent big changes in attitude. As one young adult said about Tempo, "This is the first place that I have ever been where I wasn't treated like a patient."

Grounded in a positive youth development approach, Tempo builds on young people's strengths, empowers youth to realize their potential, and puts young adults at the center of their own plans. In practice, this means providing internships where youth practice leadership skills and serve as Peer Mentors for other young adults; holding monthly meetings of the Young Adult Advisory Council, where young adults are the majority and make decisions about Tempo operations; offering community service opportunities (voter registration drives, soup kitchen, public speaking classes); and creating individual care plans that are goal-oriented and youth-driven, rather than directed by adult providers or standardized procedures.

PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION PROCESS

Tempo's Young Adult Advisory Council (YAAC) decided on three methods for collecting information on participants' utilization of Tempo services, outcomes, and experiences at Tempo. First, management and staff collected quantitative measures, such as educational attainment, employment rates, reductions in arrests, sustained self-care, and healthy community involvement. Young adults partnered with staff and outside experts in the two other evaluation components: the stories of participants' turning points, and an interview-based qualitative evaluation.

In keeping with the participatory nature of Tempo, the YAAC decided that young adults would be engaged in all aspects of conducting the qualitative evaluation. Given their own experiences trying to access supports as they transitioned to adulthood, the young adults selected by Tempo staff to become evaluators were uniquely qualified to determine what is most critical to learn from Tempo's young adult participants.

Consumer Quality Initiatives (CQI), a mental health consumer and family member-led behavioral health evaluation organization, was selected by Tempo to train young adults to become evaluators. Tempo management identified four young adults to participate in the evaluation training. Tempo management and CQI staff carefully considered who should be trained to become evaluators. All parties agreed that it was important to hire young adults who had a stake in the success of the project, but were not Tempo participants, due to confidentiality concerns. The young evaluators joined three Tempo staff and three CQI staff as members of the evaluation team.

"No one flunks out of Tempo."

The evaluation process was designed to include guidance from the young adults at every step. This participatory process began with encouraging the young adults to shape a training schedule that would best meet their preferred learning styles and needs. Training consisted of both classroom training—group discussions, activities, and role plays—and extensive field training. The young adults, guided by CQI trainers and Tempo staff, created a qualitative interview guide which was used to gather young adults' perspectives on the experience of coming to Tempo and working with a Transition Facilitator. Shared decision-making with the young adults shaped the structure and wording of the instrument, the interview process, and the analysis methodology.

Young adult evaluators and Tempo staff attempted to recruit and interview all Tempo participants who had been working with a Transition Facilitator for three to six months. Interviewing occurred in two phases, and the guide was adapted by the evaluation team for the second round of interviews. In total, 27 young adults were interviewed over the course of 18 months. The rapport that the young adults developed with interviewees and the perspectives they brought to the analysis process greatly strengthened the evaluation.

The young adult evaluators not only played integral roles in the evaluation, but also gained valuable skills. One young adult evaluator is working toward his BA in psychology and found the training to be complementary to his studies and future goal of becoming a mental health practitioner. Two young women used the skills and experience

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they acquired to become more active in advocating for the needs of young adults.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS: EMPLOYMENT, PARTICIPATION, RELATIONSHIP

Tempo outcomes show the promise of the organization's youth-led, comprehensive approach. Of the 121 young adults engaged with Transition Facilitators, our quantitative evaluation revealed that 67% improved their educational level (earning their GED, enrolling in college or vocational training), and 92% remained clean and sober. Eighty-seven percent of young adults with housing as a goal obtained or maintained stable housing, and 99% of those on probation successfully met their requirements.

According to findings from the interviews, participants' initial impression of Tempo set it apart from other programs they had experienced, with participants finding Tempo to be very welcoming, unthreatening and open. Staff were identified as the cornerstone of participants' positive experiences. Participants described staff as friendly, relatable, non judgmental, and most of all helpful. Interview findings indicate that staff's ability to build trust with participants helped create an environment in which work could begin right away. For many young adults, results were seen immediately.

In addition to assistance from staff, participants identified practical tools, such as the computers at Tempo, as important in enabling them to work toward their goals. Interns—young adults hired at Tempo as part of their comprehensive goal planning—were seen as a powerful example that Tempo values young adult goals, competence, and ability to overcome past setbacks.

The *Tempo Rocks!* video, developed by young adults, gave a third perspective on the program. Young adults self-selected to be recorded, based on how they felt about sharing their very personal experiences. Young adults described their turning points (homelessness, family chaos, probation, mental illness crisis) that led them to seek out Tempo, and how Tempo made a difference for them. Young adults recounted, for example, how important it was to be welcomed back to Tempo by caring staff and to be encouraged to try again, even after making choices with severe consequences, such as incarceration or psychiatric hospitalization. As one participant said: "No one flunks out of Tempo." Listening to the narratives has been compelling, and has helped us clarify which program elements to fortify and what to change.

Young adults come to Tempo looking for work far more than for any other resource. By listening to and learning from young adults, we concluded that purposeful employment plays a central role in identity formation for youth. Most (87%) of the 275 job seekers who utilized Tempo services were able to make some progress, generally finding part-time or temporary work. However, young adults were frustrated by the lack of jobs available to them, and even more so by the scarcity of jobs with potential growth. Those who found meaningful work (as interns, or in jobs with a supportive, learning environment) generally became stable and successful in other ways, such as keeping their housing, staying clean and sober, and starting college. Employment is a springboard for healthy adulthood.

The importance of employment, revealed in the data, has shaped next steps for Tempo. In the coming months, Tempo will focus on creating jobs for young adults by developing new opportunities through collaboration with local employers. For example, a collaboration with a local business, Lizzy's Ice Cream, has already begun, giving young adults employment and paid apprenticeship opportunities in a hands-on learning Career Path where young adults can master business skills (basics of spreadsheets, bookkeeping, advertizing, management).

Tempo blends employment opportunity, commitment to participatory youth development, and unconditional caring to help young adults build strong foundations for success, future productivity, civic engagement, and other widespread community benefits. Tempo staff and management, with CQI input, are developing "tool kits" to share our experience in effective collaboration to develop resources with and for young adults.

Youth-led planning, decision-making, and evaluation were critical in the early success of the Tempo Young Adult Resource Center. Without input and feedback from Tempo users, adult and community stakeholders may have known which resources were needed but would not have known how to attract the young adults who need them. We have learned that young adults begin to thrive when offered practical resources to aid their goal development, respectful relationships with caring adults, a chance for real self-determination and meaningful employment opportunities.

AUTHORS

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