

It **Begins at ‘Hello’**: Lessons on Enrolling and Engaging Homeless Young Adults with a Child Welfare History in Services

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Lighthouse Youth & Family Services (Lighthouse) is dedicated to empowering young people and families to succeed through a continuum of care that promotes healing and growth. The organization is nationally recognized as an innovator in services for families in crisis, for homeless youth and young adults, and for youth learning to become self-sufficient. Lighthouse headquarters are in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Lighthouse received a two-year planning grant in 2013 from the Children’s Bureau within the Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) as part of the Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) grant program. The purpose of YARH is to build the evidence base on comprehensive service models that prevent homelessness among older youth and young adults who have been involved with the child welfare system. The work conducted during the first phase contributed to ACF selecting Lighthouse in 2015 to be one of six organizations to proceed to the second phase of YARH, an initial implementation grant.

*This brief describes lessons learned from enrolling and engaging young adults ages 18-24 in the **Watch Me Rise (WMR)** comprehensive service model developed and implemented by Lighthouse. WMR incorporated the **High Fidelity Wraparound** service coordination process to serve youth who 1) had a history of child welfare involvement and 2) were currently homeless or at imminent risk of losing their housing. The unique needs of this population were continuously assessed during the development of WMR and contributed to targeted strategies for recruiting and enrolling eligible youth into the program, nurturing their initial engagement in the program, and sustaining their engagement until program completion.*

Rapid Connection with a Facilitator Promoted Enrollment

Lighthouse used the defining principles and four phases of **High Fidelity Wraparound (Wraparound)** to develop the **Watch Me Rise (WMR)** comprehensive service model.¹ WMR focused on preventing recurring homelessness among young adults (“youth”) ages 18-24 who had a child welfare history. Youth were primarily identified and referred through the Lighthouse Sheakley Center for Youth (“Youth Shelter”) when they entered as shelter residents. The Youth Shelter is a homeless shelter with 36 beds that provides housing and services to unaccompanied young adults ages 18 to 24. When youth enter the shelter, they are asked if they are currently or formerly the responsibility of child welfare. WMR eligibility was based on affirmative responses to this question or if a youth later disclosed a child welfare history after they became more comfortable sharing that information with shelter staff.

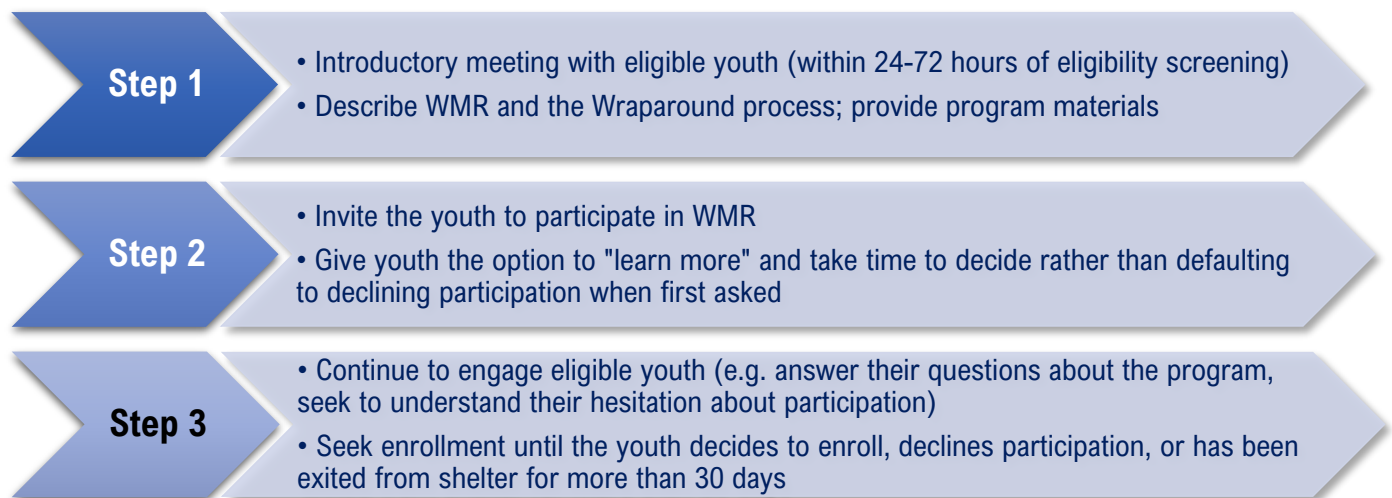
In addition to shelter resident referrals, youth with a child welfare history could be referred to WMR if they accessed the Youth Shelter day program or were involved in the Hamilton County child welfare agency’s aftercare program for youth who emancipate from child welfare. Aftercare program referrals included youth who were at imminent risk of becoming homeless or who were currently homeless but not accessing Youth Shelter services. Youth remained enrolled in WMR after they exited Youth Shelter or aftercare services. A youth’s involvement in WMR typically lasted 6-18 months depending on their unique needs.

Although WMR referrals were made internally by Lighthouse or externally by Hamilton County child welfare aftercare program staff, the enrollment process was the same for each youth (see Figure 1). First, the WMR Operations Manager, who served in a supervisory role, conducted an initial screening of youth responses to the Youth Shelter self-reported child welfare history question for all youth who entered shelter during the previous week. The Operations Manager also reviewed referrals from aftercare and the day program to determine WMR eligibility. Then the Operations Manager assigned each eligible youth to a WMR Facilitator based on current caseload balance. The WMR Facilitators were the primary staff who worked with the youth throughout WMR; however each youth was also given the choice to work with a peer-based Youth Support Advocate.²

The assigned Facilitator was responsible for conducting the enrollment process. However, if the assigned Facilitator was not available, another WMR staff member proceeded with the enrollment process but informed the youth that the assigned Facilitator would work with them during the WMR program. Lighthouse learned that having the Facilitator take the lead in enrollment initiated the trust and rapport needed for youth engagement in the program. Early testing of enrollment processes indicated that enrollment conducted by shelter staff, a central intake team, or the Operations Manager interfered with the initial relationship-building process. Also, youth reported that they wanted to know who they would be working with from the start.

The enrollment process involved three key steps (Figure 1). The full enrollment process was expected to be completed within 45 days of an eligible youth being referred to the program. **Among 172 youth referred to WMR, 81 (47%) enrolled in the program, and 99% of those youth completed enrollment within 45 days.**

Figure 1. WMR Enrollment Process



PROGRAM NOTE: *Lighthouse recognizes the most at-risk homeless youth are those who live on the street, are not seeking shelter, and are unable or unwilling to participate in services. WMR focused on enrolling clients who entered the Youth Shelter because they demonstrated a willingness to seek and engage in services, which was critical to initial implementation and assessment of WMR. In addition, although referrals from other local shelters that serve adults and families were not used during the implementation and assessment of WMR, they could be incorporated by others who seek to replicate this service model within the context of their own community and availability of shelter resources.*

Lessons Learned: Program Enrollment

- For youth accessing shelter services, identify eligible youth as quickly as possible and conduct the introductory meeting before they leave shelter. It can be difficult to reach youth after they leave shelter.
- Provide youth with items that help meet their immediate basic needs so that they can focus on the prospect of program involvement. Examples include cell phone chargers, backpacks, water bottles, and hygiene items.
- Conduct training to ensure consistency amongst staff language and approach to program enrollment.
- Consider embedding WMR within shelter outreach programs so that WMR is the first point of contact for youth with a foster care history and engagement is started prior to coming into the shelter.

Initial Engagement Was Key

The evidence-based Wraparound care coordination process used in WMR spans four phases that include specific activities and documents to help youth progress through the process. The first two phases were essential to building initial youth engagement in the program and were drivers of sustained engagement throughout all phases of WMR. Phase 1 focused on youth engagement and the development of their WMR team consisting of natural (family and friends) and formal (system) supports. In WMR this phase was extended from 2-3 weeks to 8-10 weeks to allow more time for

building trust and rapport with youth who are experiencing a housing crisis and have a history of multi-system involvement. Phase 2 lasted 2-3 months and focused on developing the youth's individualized "Plan of Care" based on information identified in Phase 1. The Plan of Care incorporated the youth's needs and goals, as well as action steps for the youth and their team members. It was expected to be completed within 45 days of enrollment into WMR.

"Wraparound begins at 'hello'...Sitting next to the person...asking questions...an organic conversation. ...The feedback I've always gotten [from youth] is, 'You heard all of that?' ...When you come back and you show them that you get a tangible product, that you've actually been listening to them, that's where you see the real buy-in."

Findings from a formative evaluation of WMR conducted from October 1, 2017-July 31, 2019 showed that among all youth enrolled in WMR (n=81) **nearly 3 out of 4 remained actively involved in WMR throughout their enrollment.**³ However, of the 23 youth identified as "inactive" at any point during their time in WMR, the majority (65%) became inactive within the first 60 days of enrollment. Furthermore, among youth who exited the program (n=48) half did so because of remaining inactive (50%) compared to nearly a quarter of youth who exited because they completed the program as expected (23%). In addition, the findings showed that only 43% of youth enrolled in WMR developed a Plan of Care and that youth without one were often those identified as inactive or who left the program within 45 days of enrollment. These findings demonstrate both the importance and difficulties with implementing Wraparound with homeless youth with a child welfare history. They also highlight that initial service engagement can have lasting effects on participation with a hard-to-reach population. Key challenges to youth engagement included WMR staff turnover, limited coordination with shelter case management activities, variation in the amount of staff time spent on youths' individual needs, and youths' overall understanding of the program.

Lighthouse modified their process during the implementation of WMR to respond to evaluation data on these challenges and identified additional modifications at the end of the evaluation period to aid future WMR participation and engagement. These modifications are included as part of lessons learned in the box below.

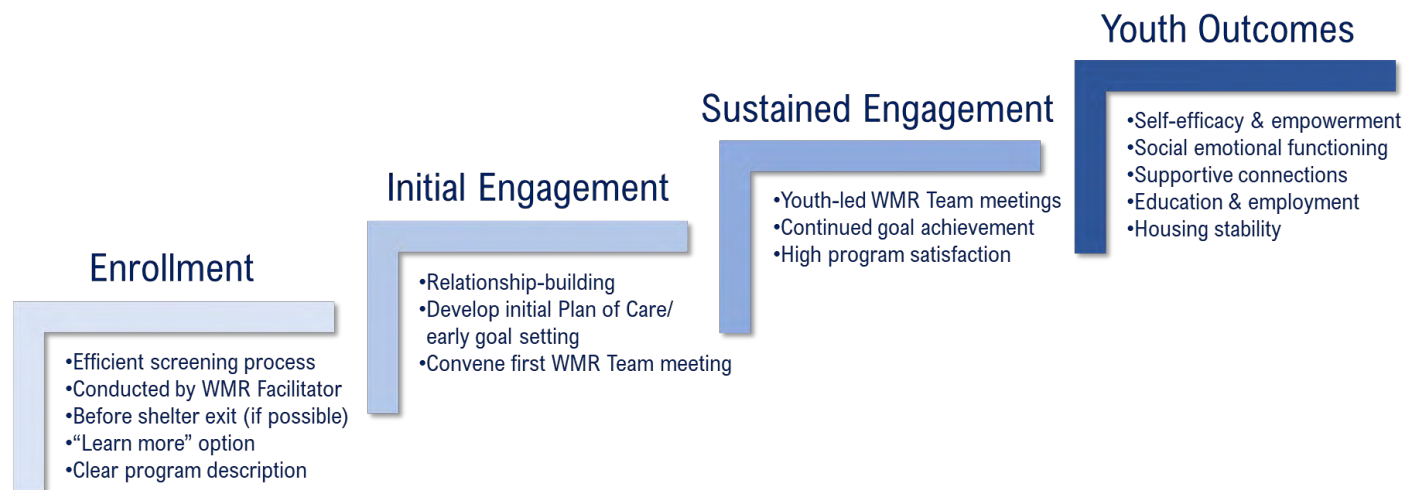
Lessons Learned: Early Engagement

- Convene first WMR Team meeting with *formal supports* within 15-30 days of enrollment so that they can assist the youth early goal attainment and to establish more consistency in WMR staff time spent with each youth. Additional time is typically needed to identify and recruit *natural supports* to the team.
- Focus the first Plan of Care goal on building the youth’s WMR Team of formal and natural supports to assist the youth and to establish more consistency in WMR staff time spent with each youth.
- Update the Plan of Care goals within 45 days of the first plan and discuss action steps with the youth’s WMR team.
- Assign a different WMR Facilitator if a youth disengages or becomes inactive after program enrollment. If a youth returns to shelter after leaving and/or re-enrolls in the program, it may help to assign a different WMR Facilitator to improve the youth’s engagement in the program.

A Plan of Care Promoted Sustained Engagement

WMR outcomes and youth engagement over time depend on the foundation established in the early stages (Figure 2). Phase 3 of WMR focuses on implementing the youth’s Plan of Care and updating it as new needs and goals are identified. This phase is typically the longest and can last up to a year depending each youth’s goals and what they believe is needed to help them achieve their goals.

Figure 2. Linking Youth Engagement to Outcomes



In evaluation interviews, WMR youth who reported a negative experience indicated that their engagement and participation wavered from the outset. A common theme among these youth was a struggle to understand the purpose of the program, which they thought contributed to their lack of interest in actively engaging in

plan development and goal setting. As a result, these youth often did not engage long enough to reach Phase 3 of WMR.

Conversely, youth with a Plan of Care expressed an understanding of WMR and the Plan of Care purpose, how the Plan of Care was used and updated with the support of their WMR Team over time, and how it related to goal setting and achievement. They also seemed aware of the process to review and update their Plan of Care and how it contributed to their progress in the program. These youth more frequently described a positive WMR experience and viewed it as strengths-based, individualized, and youth-driven. These youth appeared to engage early in the program and felt more prepared and comfortable over time to drive their WMR Team meeting agenda and Plan of Care goals. While this growing sense of self-efficacy and empowerment sustains their participation and engagement over time, it also signals when a youth is ready to successfully transition out of WMR, which is the fourth and final phase of the program.

“It gave me more confidence. I could take on things I wasn’t sure of before...It taught me how to present things, how to say [what I need], and getting used to being on the spot. I got used to it over time and got the hang of it.”
~WMR Youth

Lessons Learned: Sustained Engagement

- Connect youth to resources that support their goals so that they can make progress in WMR. During WMR, Support Funds were available to assist youth in accessing community resources that contributed to the goals identified in their Plan of Care. For example, WMR paid for driving lessons so that a youth could transport himself to work. WMR also paid for a recreation center membership so a youth could access activities that supported his mental health and ability to work on goals that contributed to stable housing. These funds were available as a part of YARH funding, but other sites looking to implement WMR should identify potential internal or external resources to support youth as they work on their goals.
- Offer peer supports so that youth can maximize WMR processes, especially when they are implementing their Plan of Care. During WMR, the Youth Support Advocate (YSA) functioned as a peer support and was a critical WMR staff member. YSA staff provided additional support to help youth develop skills to achieve their goals, prepare for WMR Team meetings, and learn how to advocate for themselves. Although WMR Facilitators provided the care coordination mechanism to support these functions, YSA staff provided the day-to-day, hands-on support that helped youth more deeply engage in the Wraparound process and prepare for the transition out of WMR.

Endnotes

¹For more information about WMR and the four phases of Wraparound:

Dickerscheid, R., Houchin, C. Lindquist-Grantz, R., & Downing, K., (2020). *Using Wraparound with Homeless Youth Who Have a Child Welfare History: Lessons from the Field* (Issue Brief No. 2).

²For more information about WMR key staff positions:

Dickerscheid, R., Houchin, C. Lindquist-Grantz, R., & Downing, K., (2020). *Integrating Peer Supports into Services for Homeless Youth with a Child Welfare History: Lessons from the Field* (Issue Brief No. 3).

³For more information about the WMR Formative Evaluation and key findings:

Lindquist-Grantz, R., Downing, K., Dickerscheid, R., & Houchin, C. (2020). *Watch Me Rise: Formative Evaluation Findings* (Issue Brief No. 1).

A WMR Intervention Manual has been prepared and contains additional details about the comprehensive service model, evaluation findings, and recommendations for the implementation of WMR. For more information about the manual and the WMR program, contact Victoria Ackman at vackman@lys.org

The University of Cincinnati Institute for Policy Research provided research and evaluation services throughout the project, which contributed to the development and implementation of WMR. For more information about the evaluation, contact Dr. Robin Lindquist-Grantz, lindqurn@uc.edu

To learn more about the YARH grantees, including the work they completed in Phase I, please visit:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/building-capacity-to-evaluate-interventions-for-youth-with-child-welfare-involvement-at-risk-of-homelessness>

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