

Runaway and Homeless Youth Training & Technical Assistance Center



Connect with Us!

FYSB

(w) [acf.hhs.gov/
programs/fysb](http://acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb)

RHYTTAC

(p) 412-399-5747
(w) rhyttac.net
(e) info@rhyttac.net
(fb) /rhyttac
(tw) @rhyttac

Building Career Pathways for Runaway and Homeless Youth Staff

Runaway and homeless youth (RHY) programs rely on staff with a broad range of skills and abilities—direct service staff who understand youth’s developmental needs and the impacts of homelessness, as well as supervisory and executive staff who understand an organization’s human resources, administrative, and financial systems. Expertise takes time to develop, and organizations that retain staff for longer periods of time are subsequently able to provide higher quality services than those with frequent turnover or inexperienced teams. This tip sheet describes the benefits of strengthening career pathways for RHY staff, simple ways to establish clear paths in RHY programs, and how to find additional resources.

What the Research Says

- Finding ways to promote expertise within the youth-serving field professionalizes RHY work and improves the quality of services for youth and families.¹
- Comprehensive training, supervision, and professional development opportunities are significantly correlated with higher retention rates, and thus are highly valued by human service employees.²
- Being able to promote from within for supervisory and administrative roles strengthens morale and leads to more efficient and effective organizational systems.³

What are Career Pathways?

Career pathways are series of structured steps and connected supports that enable staff to advance over time to higher-level credentials and better jobs. Each step is intentionally designed in order to prepare an individual to progress to the next level, building the kinds of skills and experience that employers find relevant and valuable.⁴

Effective Career Pathways:

- Span from entry level to advanced degree instruction
- Focus on positions in demand that pay a livable wage
- Allow many ways in which to enter and exit the path
- Are “stackable,” meaning that completing earlier steps boosts one’s position later
- Leverage organizational partnerships

Even if your organization has not articulated formal career pathways for staff, rest assured that institutions of higher education, state agencies, credentialing boards, and workforce development organizations have already developed paths that your RHY staff can follow.

¹Curry, D., Eckles, F., Stuart, C., & Qaqish, B. (2010). National child and youth care practitioner professional certification: Promoting competent care for children and youth. *Child Welfare*, 89(2), pp. 57–77.

²Annie E. Casey Foundation (April 9, 2015). A child welfare leader’s desk guide to building a high-performing agency. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/10-practices-part-one>

³Auvin, J. (June 2019). Employee development in nonprofits: Promoting from within. Mission Box. Retrieved from <https://www.missionbox.com/article/218/employee-development-in-nonprofits-promoting-from-within>

⁴Career Ladders Project (2013). A definition of career pathways. Retrieved from https://www.careerladdersproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Pathways_def_CLP.pdf

Tips for Building Career Pathways

Find the Right Path

- Identify state and national policies that govern your RHY program's work. What licenses and credentials are required in order to provide the different services that RHY in your program need? Who oversees licensing and credentialing?⁵
- Become familiar with relevant career clusters and pathways. RHY work is typically categorized as part of the Family and Community Services pathway, but related pathways like Early Childhood Development and Mental Health Counseling may also apply, based on your RHY program structure.⁶ (See sidebar.)
- Explore available learning opportunities. What pertinent certificate- and degree-level courses are offered at local colleges or through distance learning? What education or training is provided by state agencies or by other nonprofits?
- Connect with workforce development professionals and other key partners such as the social work department chair at a state university, for example, or a mental health agency that routinely supervises post-graduate interns. Federally funded workforce development programs have resources to address financial and administrative barriers (training costs, job market analysis, partner coordination, etc.).
- Research and consider joining national- and state-level movements in order to professionalize youth work. For example, Indiana and Missouri have clear academic paths for entering youth work; Vermont and Minnesota have clearly defined ways in which to advance within the field; and Michigan and Missouri have established state-level youth worker credentials.⁷ A national professional youth worker credential is also available through the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice.
- Prioritize the paths that are most important for moving your RHY program in the direction in which it needs to go. For example, your community may need more adolescent psychiatrists or trauma counselors, or perhaps the maternity group home that you operate wants to add a pre-school program.
- Look ahead. State-level associations and professional groups identify and monitor trends in the field and emerging issues that call for new knowledge, skills, or abilities among RHY staff.

History & Definitions

A career pathways framework was first developed by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) in the 1990s. The framework that is now typically used by federal career pathway initiatives organizes information about six occupational fields into 16 career clusters that together include more than 80 pathways to career advancement.

Career clusters are occupations that require common skills and knowledge for success.

Career pathways are a series of coursework and training experiences that meet the needs of employers seeking qualified staff in a given field.

View [Minnesota Career Fields, Clusters and Pathways Chart](http://mnfso.org/pdf/cte_wheel.pdf) (http://mnfso.org/pdf/cte_wheel.pdf) of the commonly adopted national framework.

Sources: *The History of Career Clusters*, K. Ruffing; *Career Clusters, Advance CTE; Technical Skill Attainment*, Minnesota State; and *Early Learning Career Pathways Initiative*, L. Dogget and L.K. Smith

⁵O'Donovan, J., Cairns, D., Sousa, M., & Valcheva, V. (2018). *Mapping the educational and career paths of youth workers*. Council of Europe and European Union. Retrieved from <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/expert-group-researching-education-career-paths-youth-workers>

⁶Minnesota State CAREERwise Education (n.d.). Career clusters. Retrieved from <https://careerwise.minnstate.edu/careers/clusters.html>

⁷Starr, E. (2015). Youth workers need defined, broad career paths. *Youth Today*. Retrieved from <https://youthtoday.org/2015/06/youth-workers-need-defined-broad-career-paths>

What Organizations Can Do

- Gain clarity about your program's short- and long-term staffing needs by exploring how staff typically move between positions in-house and assessing where your best talent is concentrated.⁸
- Establish policies on internal advancement that describe posting procedures, management nomination processes, and how employees' skills and abilities are documented.
- Discuss pathways and provide individualized coaching during supervision. During performance reviews, ask questions about job satisfaction, how staff rate their own performance, what motivates them, and how management can support their job goals.⁹ One organization, Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health, conducted an inventory in order to determine how many staff members have active plans in place; trained supervisors in how to have the "development talk" and how to create written development plans in collaboration with staff; and invested in leadership opportunities at all levels of the organization.
- Provide concrete support in forms that could include tuition assistance, loan repayment, paid time for learning, and on-the-job opportunities for staff to practice new skills with support from mentors and clinical supervisors.¹⁰
- Remain open to change. Consider creating new positions, updating position descriptions, and increasing compensation as staff advance professionally in ways that benefit the program.¹¹
- Provide opportunities to share new knowledge through in-service training, national conference presentations, and co-authorship on white papers or research papers. Give "stretch assignments" that challenge workers to learn new skills.
- Recognize staff who are high performers—those who take on new responsibilities and are solution-focused and work well with others, even under pressure—and demonstrate trust by not micromanaging their attempts to grow into new roles.¹²
- Form strategic partnerships with credentialing bodies, higher education and training sites, workforce development groups, and community-based organizations.¹³
- Sponsor training or professional testing to help advance the field. Invite employees from partner agencies to participate.
- Investigate whether state agencies offer tiered reimbursement for services provided by credentialed staff.¹⁴ For example, if an RHY worker becomes a certified substance abuse counselor, the program may be able to bill Medicaid or state contracts at a higher rate for the recovery group in your drop-in center.

⁸Sibson Consulting (n.d.). Career Frameworks. <https://www.sibson.com/services/performance-rewards/career-frameworks>

⁹Auin, J. (June 2019). Employee development in nonprofits: Promoting from within. Mission Box. Retrieved from <https://www.missionbox.com/article/218/employee-development-in-nonprofits-promoting-from-within>

¹⁰Shockley, C., & Thompson, A. (2012). Youth workers in college: A replicable model for professional development. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, pp. 735–739.

¹¹Chamberlain, A. (2017). Why do employees stay? A clear career path and good pay, for starters. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2017/03/why-do-employees-stay-a-clear-career-path-and-good-pay-for-starters>

¹²Auin, J. (June 2019). Employee development in nonprofits: Promoting from within. Mission Box. Retrieved from <https://www.missionbox.com/article/218/employee-development-in-nonprofits-promoting-from-within>

¹³Thompson, A., & Shockley, C. (2013). Developing youth workers: Career ladders for sector stability. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35, pp. 447–452.

¹⁴Gannett, E., & Starr, E. (2016). Recommendations: Quality out-of-school time. Research & Action Report. Wellesley Centers for Women. Retrieved from <https://www.wcwonline.org/Research-Action-Report-Spring/Summer-2016/recommendations-quality-out-of-school-time>

Additional Resources

Family and Community Services Pathway (n.d.). Minnesota State University's CareerWise resource center has tested and maintains information on over 80 career pathways. Online interactive graphics include information about wages, job growth outlook, and typical job tasks. <https://careerwise.minnstate.edu/careers/family-community-services-pathwayL.html>

Career Pathways: Catalog of Toolkits (2016). This catalog from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services lists and describes dozens of toolkits that offer guidance on developing and implementing career pathway initiatives, with an emphasis on promoting cross-sector partnership. Toolkits are referenced by publisher, intended audience, target population, industry, and key elements for success. https://cptoolkitcatalog.peerta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/current_catalog.pdf

A Practical Guide to Developing Career Pathways (2018). This guide from the State of Michigan describes the process of developing career pathways and offers practical tips for each stage. The appendix also includes tools for assessing training gaps, mapping career pathway resources, and selecting evaluation measures. https://www.michigan.gov/documents/ted/R5_5_MICPFramework_20180730_629836_7.pdf

Center for Occupational Research and Development (n.d.). CORD is a nonprofit that works to build the capacity of educators, trainers, and businesses in order to promote career success. Its online resources include background information on career pathways frameworks and adult career pathways, as well as technical assistance tools to help implement and scale regional career pathways programs. <https://www.cord.org/index.php>

RHY Staff Retention Information Sheet Series (2019). This set of five information sheets from the Family and Youth Services Bureau describes strategies for retaining quality staff in RHY programs by focusing on self-care, organizational culture, hiring, compensation, and career pathways. <https://www.rhyttac.net>

This resource was supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award of \$2.1 million dollars to National Safe Place Network to operate the Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance Center. This resource was funded at 100 percent by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the author (Youth Catalytics) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the U.S. Government.