

3-2010

YLAT Youth Leadership Advisory Team: An Innovative Approach to Systems Improvement

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Recommended Citation

Wu MZ, Burns P, Zanghi M, Walters D. Ylat Youth Leadership Advisory Team: An Innovative Approach to Systems Improvement. Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine, Muskie School of Public Service;2010.

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Youth Leadership Advisory Team

*An innovative approach
to systems improvement*

Marie Zemler Wu, Penthea Burns, Marty Zanghi and Dianna Walters

March 2010

Muskie School of Public Service
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

March 2010

Dear Friends,

We are privileged to have worked with so many wonderful young adults who have been part of the child welfare system and members of Maine's Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT). YLAT has been an extraordinary organization because of each youth's passion, kindness and love for one another, as well as their commitment to make things better for others like themselves. Youth leaders bring their life experiences to teach others that to create a holistic approach to systems improvement requires reformers to use their heads and their hearts.

We've learned many lessons through working with YLAT members over the years – far too many to acknowledge here. Lessons we learned from founding youth leaders are core to what we do – and they always will be.

The foundation for youth and adults engaging in any work together must be trust and authentic relationships. Trust is built by adults communicating openly, listening with genuine curiosity, keeping their word and following through with their commitments. Many young people have trusted and fully engaged in this partnership. Youths' commitment and the quality of their work on behalf of all youth in care have changed the system. Working with youth leaders has also changed us and made us better people. For that we are deeply grateful.

For more than 10 years the State of Maine Department of Health and Human Services has made an unrivaled commitment to the engagement of youth voices in the reform of their system. YLAT would not exist without the state's leadership. Their efforts should be celebrated and replicated by other states.

In 2008 YLAT was a finalist for the Kennedy School Ash Center for Innovations in American Government Award. Though YLAT did not win that award, we walked away from that experience with something more valuable. The awards process provided us with the opportunity to reflect on YLAT's accomplishments and what has made a success over the past ten years. We would like to thank the Ash Center for their support and recognition. It is because of the Ash Center that this publication is even possible.

Thanks are also due to the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their support for the production of this publication.

We want to extend a very special 'thank you' to Marie Zemler Wu. Marie has been the driving force in producing this document to describe YLAT and its impact. This publication has been one of our goals for many years. Marie's vision and clarity made this paper a reality.

Follow your hopes and dreams!

Marty & Pen
www.ylat.org



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University of Southern Maine

This publication is made possible by a grant from the Innovations in American Government Award, a program of the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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Introduction



Like every state in the nation, Maine provides out-of-home care to children and youth who cannot live safely at home with their parents. At any given time, more than 1,700 of Maine’s children are living temporarily in foster homes, residential treatment centers, or group homes, while their families work with caseworkers and service providers in the hopes of safely and permanently reunifying. Managing a child welfare system is a complex and difficult endeavor – led by government and shared by a vast network of system and community partners. Reform efforts are a near-constant process. Finding solutions that are effective and lasting is much more rare.

Maine has sustained comprehensive child welfare reforms. Among its many accomplishments: a drastic reduction in the number of children placed; much-shortened stays in care; and greater reliance on relatives as foster and adoptive families. The sustained focus on comprehensive family solutions, rather than only safety and protection, has received national recognition.

Despite the state’s progress, finding solutions for older youth in care is a most difficult challenge. In recent years, 200 young people reach adulthood in the State of Maine annually without a permanent family of their own. Although the total number of children in care in the nation is on the decline, the number of young adults “aging out” has continued to increase.

Research suggests that the future is challenging for young people who “age out.” They are more likely than other young people to experience economic hardship, homelessness, criminal involvement, mental health problems, and early parenting. They may lack the skills and family supports they need to continue their education or sustain gainful employment. Many have serious physical and mental health needs, but lack the personal and family connections they require to address them. In the search for solutions to reverse these negative outcomes, programs

Ten years ago, services given to adolescents were seen as a lower priority. YLAT and the teen conferences have made their presence known. Their needs as a group are harder to ignore and not address.

–Administrator

across the country have assisted youth in care, providing higher education, employment, and “life skills” training, from finances to housekeeping.

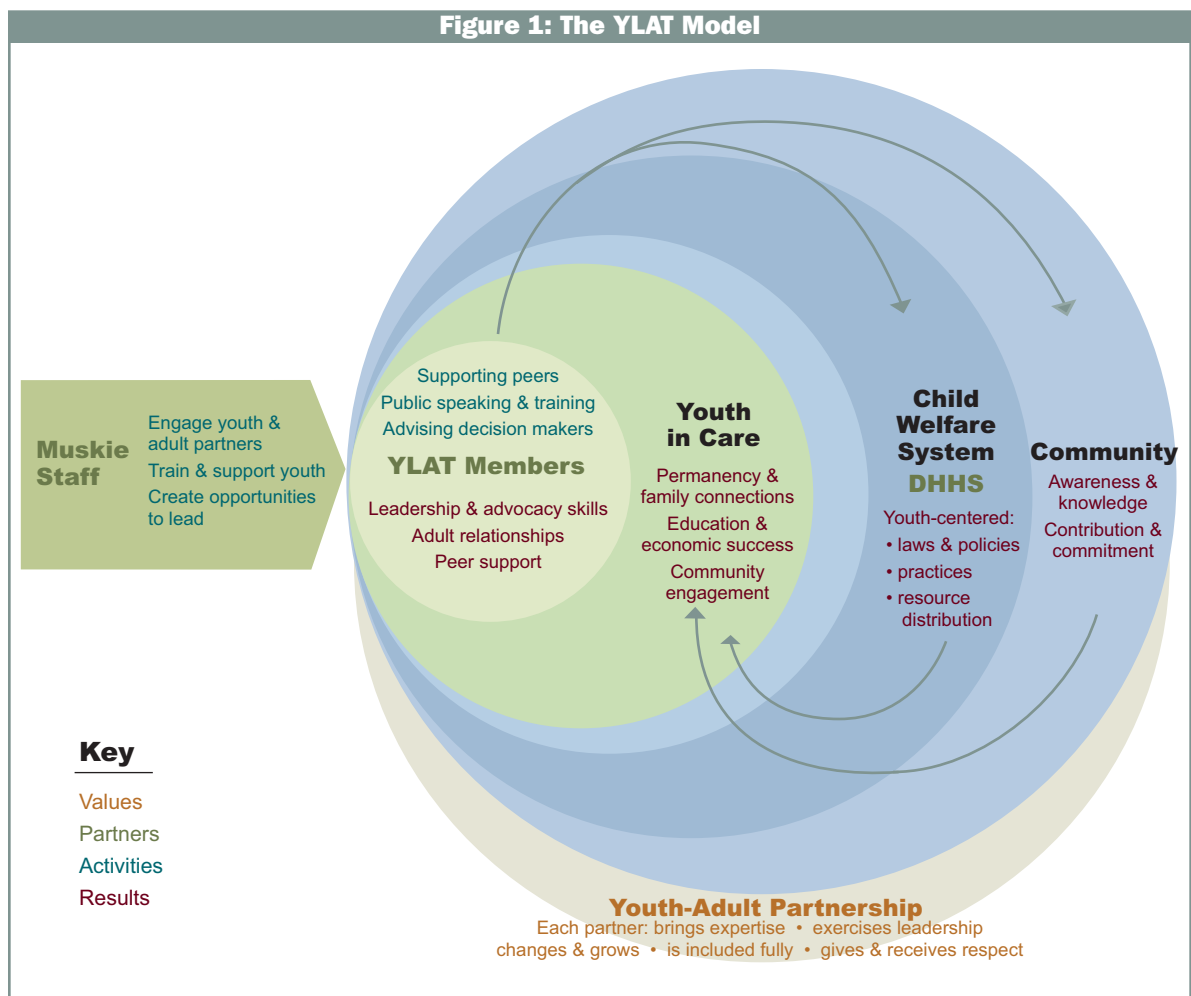
Over the past two decades, the Maine child welfare system has developed an innovative approach to improve outcomes for older youth in care by working in partnership with youth. The Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT) brings together young people who are involved with the child welfare system and creates opportunities for them to learn and practice leadership and advocacy skills. YLAT is a three-way partnership including the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine, Maine’s Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and Maine’s youth in care. The approach is a departure from traditional “programming.” Rather than providing a direct service, YLAT encourages youth members to join a team of their peers, develop advocacy skills, advise policy makers, and contribute to improved outcomes for all young people in care.

Amid a comprehensive system reform, YLAT has been a guiding force, a clear voice, and a motivation to continue the urgent effort. As the team celebrates its tenth anniversary as an organization, it has enjoyed many successes and garnered attention—including requests for replication—across the nation. This paper grew from a desire to clearly articulate the YLAT model, both to aid other sites considering a similar approach, and to help the team as they determine their strategies for YLAT’s next decade of achievements.

Overview

The program model

This white paper began with a mission to map out what YLAT is and does. Following interviews, drafts, and revisions, with input from the Muskie School staff, youth members, DHHS, and other stakeholders, the results are Figure 1: The YLAT Model, as well as this white paper, detailing the model and illustrating it through two case studies on team initiatives.



To understand the team, the model begins with a central circle that includes all youth in care. YLAT starts with the goal that they experience good outcomes: permanent families of their own, with a host of family connections; strong education with the prospects of economic success; and engagement in their communities. Many child welfare programs share these goals, but YLAT is unique in its approach to achieving them.

At the core, YLAT is three-way partnership, including youth YLAT members, staff at the Muskie School, and leaders at the Department of Health and Human Services. The foundation of their relationship is a Youth-Adult Partnership, embracing these values: each participating adult and young person brings expertise, exercises leadership, changes and grows through participation, is fully included, and gives and receives respect. These values dictate an innovative approach, which shines through the operations of the team.

A core of professional YLAT staff at the Muskie School and within DHHS work with a group of the youth in care, who voluntarily become engaged as members of the YLAT team. The staff offers training and support to the YLAT members, teaching advocacy skills and public speaking. Additionally, they create opportunities for the youth to be leaders, supporting their peers and advising child welfare decision-makers.

YLAT activities, in themselves, have benefits for the youth members. They gain leadership and advocacy skills. They form relationships with the caring adults who staff and volunteer with the team. Perhaps most importantly, the youth meet one another – learning they are not alone in their child welfare journey and gaining friendships with other young people who can truly understand.

However, the true impact of YLAT extends beyond the positive outcomes for the young people directly involved. The young leaders reach out into the child welfare system and broad community, sharing their stories and training the adults whose actions impact their young lives. Within the child welfare system, their first audience is their partner – DHHS. There, the team members have access to administrators, advising them on all major policies before they are enacted. The team also trains every new social worker who joins the Department.

The team then reaches further, to decision-makers in the broader child welfare system: judges, attorneys, court personnel, and law makers. In the community, they reach media, faith groups, businesses, and neighbors. With their message, YLAT members influence laws and policies, case practices, organizational culture, and resource distribution – making them more responsive and youth-centered. In the community, they raise awareness and knowledge, dispelling myths about child welfare. Aware and knowledgeable community members can no longer stand by. They find ways to make contributions, many making lasting commitments to benefit youth in care.

Through the influence of the YLAT members, participating youth and others like them have a better chance at good outcomes: family connections, good jobs, and community connections. In the next few pages, this paper explores the values, context, partners, activities, and desired results that comprise the YLAT model in much greater detail.

Values

The foundation of YLAT's innovative approach

In YLAT's visual model, Youth-Adult Partnership is depicted as a crescent, cradling the rest of the model's components (see Figure 2: Values). It is foundational, wrapped around the rest of the partners, participants, activities, and outcomes that make up YLAT – holding up and embracing the entire approach. The YLAT team defines Youth-Adult Partnership as inclusive of five central values.



Each partner brings expertise.

For Youth. Youth team members possess wisdom about the child welfare system that can only be known from their direct and personal experiences in care. That wisdom is important to other youth in care, teammates, and the child welfare system. Relying on youth expertise means not only hearing from young people on adult-driven agenda items, but also providing them with the opportunity to identify and prioritize their own critical issues. Youth are never discounted as too young, too vulnerable, or too close to the experience to bring a valuable perspective. This value contrasts with many other programs, in which youth are recipients and beneficiaries of the intervention.

For Adults. The adult partners of YLAT are also called upon to share their expertise. They are skilled at youth work. They lead the child welfare system. They have years of organizational and political experience. Adults are expected to share that wisdom with the team's youth members. Youth are, by definition, less experienced in these areas. Learning from adults who have greater expertise through experience is essential. Sometimes, applying this value is as simple as translating child welfare acronyms or explaining the chain of command. Many times, it is more complex – sharing expertise by training, coaching, and mentoring.

Each partner exercises leadership.

For youth. All youth have the capability to lead. Living this value means giving them the inspiration, confidence, role-models, and support to be able to lead. It also means recognizing that leadership takes many forms. Opportunities, therefore, are constructed to embrace a range of approaches, talents, and skills.

Other programs or approaches may limit leadership opportunities to the best and the brightest, showcasing the most “talented” youth. But YLAT never turns away from young people, even as they struggle with school, become young parents, find themselves homeless, attempt suicide, or possess only minimal leadership ability. Leadership opportunities are never denied as punishment.

For adults. Adults who hear from YLAT often describe feeling invigorated and remembering the reasons they came to work on behalf of children and families. Those adults who are committed to the partnership are expected to react with more than inspiration – they are to exercise leadership in response to their interactions with members of the team. Most often, this means using their roles to implement the ideas of the team members: helping youth to reach the right audiences, embedding new ideas in child welfare policy, or shifting their own case practices. It also means carrying the values and messages of the team to colleagues and superiors – and the values of youth-adult partnership into their organizational culture.

Each partner changes and grows through participation.

For youth. When youth become team members, share their expertise, and assume leadership roles, they are surrounded with support, adequate training and preparation in advance, as well as the chance to debrief and reflect on the experience afterwards. Both this training to lead and their experiences as leaders are transformative. The team speaks openly about the ways that participating in YLAT strengthens them as leaders, shapes their beliefs, may change their opinions, and can drive their career plans.

For adults. Living this value requires an openness to hearing – and internalizing – team messages. Staying open to change and growth through interactions with the youth remains essential for adult partners, even following years of work with the team. Change and growth occurs individually and organizationally. Individually, changing an attitude or perspective impacts how the adult operates in his or her own role. Organizationally, as more adults across DHHS and the Muskie School partner with the youth, a shared understanding, place of reference, and set of assumptions are present. This is true even when the adults are working on topics other than YLAT or older youth in care.

Each partner is included fully.

For youth. A traditional approach to organizations suggests identifying leaders, requiring consistent participation, and moving uniformly towards defined goals from meeting to meeting. But for youth in the child welfare system, placements change, personal crises arise, priorities conflict, or transportation falls through. In short, traditional organizations have barriers that can prohibit participation by young people who are managing complex lives. YLAT, therefore, strives to break these barriers and allow great flexibility. Those present make decisions. Past topics remain open to discussion, as necessary. Hierarchical leadership structures are avoided. Team activities, training approaches, and leadership opportunities are varied, remaining inclusive of different personalities, learning styles, and abilities.

For adults. Inclusivity, among adult partners, often means remembering to join the ranks of the team—rather than remain separate and superior. At team meetings or trainings, adults do not stand on the sidelines. They are in the circle, part of the brainstorm, sharing their experiences, or playing along with the game. Adults are also expected to learn during trainings, rather than leave the room or work on something else. At conferences, for example, seeing a DHHS leader, caseworker, and youth member all working together on a team building exercise is a common sight.

Each partner gives and receives respect.

For youth and adults. All the youth and adults who are part of the team bring skills, knowledge, and understanding. They are expected to share trust and work to earn trust in one another. No member of the partnership is more or less valued than the others.

For the three central partners—YLAT members, the Muskie staff, and DHHS—living, modeling, and refining youth-adult partnership is what both defines and sustains the program. Youth tend to know these values inherently, although their experiences in the child welfare system may have stripped away their confidence in them. Working alongside adults who embrace these values, however, may be somewhat exceptional in their lives—and something many youth members cite as key to why they join and stay part of the YLAT team.

For adults, living the YLAT values can be more challenging. While the ideas are not new or difficult, consistency in day-to-day application requires constant self-awareness and ongoing reinforcement with fellow staff members. To add to the complexity, many of the adults in the partnership—those working for DHHS—actually have custodial authority as the court-appointed “parents” of the team’s youth. Moreover, few similar models are available for guidance: in other youth-adult partnerships, such as housing groups or school committees, all members are part of the same community and face similar conditions. It is a situation without easy answers.

Adults in the partnership note that having core values, continually returning to those values, recognizing when they have fallen short of living the values, then continuing to strive for their deeper application is key. Modeling and refining the application of youth-adult partnership is what makes YLAT successful. Successful youth-adult partnership — as the foundation of the more concrete and visible systemic reforms — is ultimately responsible for the improved outcomes that YLAT creates.

An Opportunity for Everyone

When YLAT first formed, adult staff soon set about assisting the initial youth leaders in structuring their team. Those first youth were quick to discourage the adults from creating a formal hierarchy or leadership board. Instead, they insisted that no application, election, or minimal level of participation be required. As the early members astutely assessed, life in child welfare placement can be unstable and unpredictable. Their goal was for YLAT to remain an inclusive, supportive activity—never another source of pressure.

Today, YLAT staff have made this philosophy an underlying part of the YLAT structure. A “continuum” of activities intentionally offers both low- and high-intensity options for involvement. Two annual overnight meetings—the Teen Conference and the Leadership Summit—unite the group and gather larger numbers of participants. Monthly district meetings provide a routine way to be involved.

Panel presentations and training responsibilities are available for youth interested in public speaking. By sharing their experiences as part of a panel (rarely as a single speaker), individuals can opt out of responding if they begin to feel uncomfortable. Statewide and national engagements tap the most experienced speakers who have had a chance to practice with a smaller audience.

For youth with creative talents, a team magazine features poetry, essays, and artwork. More recently, dramatic presentations have become a common way for the team to spread its message. Finally, team members with particular interests and passion step forward to create and lead initiatives, such as championing the sibling legislation or drafting the Foster Youth Bill of Rights.

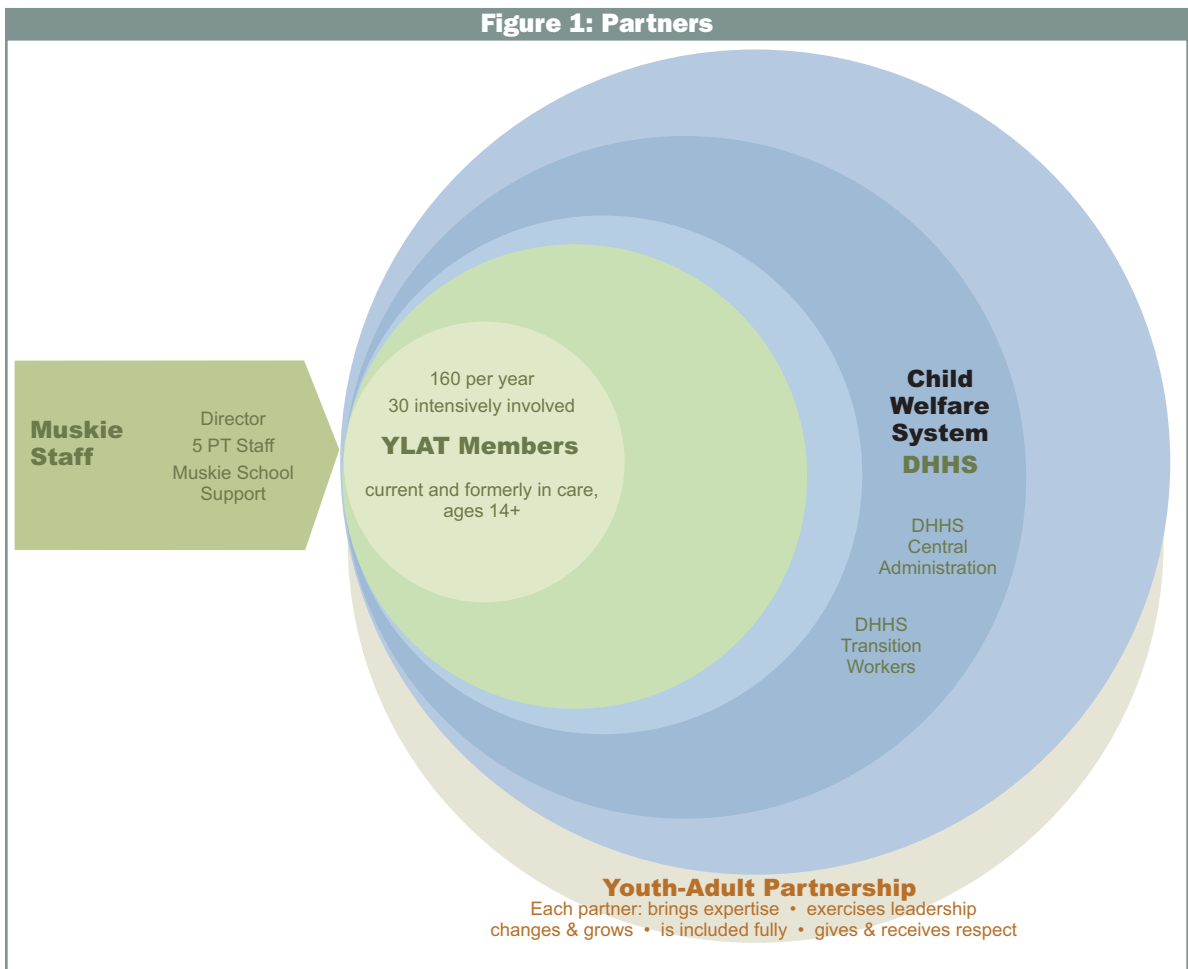
When you're in the foster care system you're being bounced from home to home to home and nothing ever stays the same. It's been the same people working for YLAT for the most part. It's just nice...you know it's going to be there when you go back.

–Youth

Three Core Partners

Youth members, Muskie staff, and DHHS

The daily operations, special events, and ongoing initiative of the YLAT program represent a sizable effort from a vast number of youth, staff, and system partners. This section (as well as Figure 3: Partners) discusses the three central partners involved in YLAT – the youth members, Muskie School staff, and DHHS staff – and their respective roles.



Youth Members

For YLAT, young people are the beneficiaries of the program – as well as equal partners in its operation. The young people involved in YLAT are currently or were formerly in the custody of DHHS. YLAT formally reaches out to youth, ages 14 to 21. Occasionally younger members join, and often participation continues into adulthood – shifting from youth member to adult partner and volunteer. Youth members come from across Maine, from the state’s largest cities to its most rural areas. They live in foster homes, relative care, adoptive families, group homes, residential treatment centers, and on their own.

Youth members are likely to be referred and recruited for YLAT membership by social workers, school staff, care providers, guardians ad litem, mentors, and peers. In keeping with the team’s core values, YLAT is a low-barrier initiative – inviting all youth to participate, regardless of skill level – recognizing that all youth have the capacity to lead. Membership is voluntary and each young person determines his or her own level of commitment to meetings and events.

The role of youth members is to set the team’s agenda and determine its message. They are the public voice of YLAT. They also support one another, coming to the team with a desire to help themselves and their peers to learn and grow. In 2006, YLAT leadership activities directly involved 263 youth, 76 percent of Maine’s 14- to 21-year-old youth in care population; in 2007, 218 youth, or 41 percent were involved.

Muskie School of Public Service Staff

Staff at the Muskie School of Public Service, part of the University of Southern Maine, run day-to-day operations of YLAT. Having a formal organization at the helm is a cornerstone of the YLAT approach, distinguishing the team from many other advocacy organizations that operate through membership fees and volunteers’ leadership. YLAT leaders believe that having paid professional staff maintain the organization keeps youth members’ time free to focus on developing their policy messages and supporting their peers.

Notably, the organizational home to YLAT is at the Muskie School, outside of DHHS. By design, this allows the team a level of autonomy while still maintaining close ties – and easy access – to the child welfare agency’s administration. A special feature of YLAT’s organization model is that the Muskie School is part of a public university. As part of the university community, YLAT frequently receives time and expertise from a host of researchers, faculty, students, and interns who assist with particular projects. The University also has a cooperative agreement with DHHS to serve as the training institute for initial and continuing education of caseworkers and foster/adoptive families, creating a unique synergy and deep institutional knowledge of Maine’s child welfare system.

YLAT History

In the late 1980s, Marty Zanghi was among those in Maine working with teens in care and seeking ways to improve service delivery. His role at the time, through the Harvard University-affiliated Judge Baker Children's Center, was to provide training and technical assistance to the state's Independent Living Workers (an earlier incarnation of the position today known as Transition Workers). In 1989, Zanghi and the Independent Living Workers (Pentheia Burns was among these, as were two of the six current Transition Workers) brought together a small group of young people in care, seeking their advice on how to structure a teen conference.

The teen conference, attended by youth and Department leaders, was a great success. The teens loved the event and asked the adult planners to create similar future opportunities. The adults, for their part, were struck by the sophisticated feedback youth provided about the structure of the conference and how the child welfare system should be changed.

The teen conference is now 20 years old, and has always had a youth planning team. Gradually, that planning team began to call itself the Youth Advisory Team. They also began to develop ideas extending beyond the annual conference. In 1998, they held their first Youth Leadership Summit. At the Summit, youth attendees first proposed the idea of a year-round team. Soon after, then Department Commissioner Kevin Concannon agreed that the Department would provide the necessary financial support. Zanghi's technical assistance grant had, by then, moved to the University of Southern Maine—which also provides training to all of Maine's casework staff. In 1999, the Department formed a cooperative agreement with the Muskie School of Public Service. YLAT was officially founded as a year-round team, with a full-time dedicated coordinator.

Since 1999, YLAT has had the same director. She is responsible for the overall direction of the program, its staff, and its programming. Her tasks are diverse, ranging from working directly with team members to grant writing (to supplement state funds) to securing speaking opportunities for team members. The Muskie School also employs five part-time staff (the equivalent of 2.5 full time positions), who provide support at the regional level and extend the reach of YLAT across Maine. Their role is to remain in close contact with the youth on the team. They recruit young people to participate, help team members plan regional meetings, and help the team members grow into skilled leaders. They are also closely connected with DHHS transition workers and caseworkers, whose role in staffing YLAT is described further below. Finally, a senior manager of the Muskie School worked with the original group of teens who conceptualized YLAT in the early 1990s. Today, he plays an administrative role and remains an involved champion for the team.

Department of Health and Human Services

The third YLAT partner is DHHS, supplying essential financial and staff support to the program. The central administration funds a cooperative agreement between the state and University of Southern Maine, providing YLAT's predominant source of income. The vision and commitment of the central administration of DHHS originally provided the opportunity for YLAT to form, and that funding level for the program has remained steady or increased since 1998.

DHHS' investment in YLAT is more than financial. The team has close ties – and frequent access – to top decision-makers. DHHS central administration staff involve youth in policy development, seek out youth members for high-level advisory roles, and integrate the team into training and professional education of caseworkers and foster/adoptive families.

DHHS also provides key staffing to YLAT. Efforts to support older youth as they transition out of care are led by the central administration's Chaffee Program Manager and her statewide staff of seven DHHS transition workers. Alongside their responsibilities to help with educational plans, housing, job searches, and life skills, they also serve as co-hosts of the YLAT regional team meetings. Their frequent contact with older youth in care makes them excellent recruiters, actively engaging youth members to join the YLAT team. They also provide or arrange transportation to team events, share information about the child welfare system, provide emotional support to youth members before and after participation in YLAT events, and engage YLAT members in leadership activities.

Similarly, DHHS caseworkers and supervisors – who provide ongoing case management to families involved with the child welfare system – are a critical link between youth and the YLAT program. Often caseworkers tell young people about YLAT and make arrangements for them to be at YLAT events. In some instances, engaged caseworkers, supervisors, or district administrators become even more deeply involved. These staff have been known to bring YLAT members into their district offices to work closely on a local project, advise on an upcoming decision, or speak to regional leaders. While their particular involvement varies from staff member to staff member, the YLAT model depends on the staff time dedicated by DHHS employees.

Benefits of University Setting

YLAT enjoys the great fortune of having its organizational home inside in a university setting. The program, staff, youth members, and university benefit as:

- **Student interns engage with the team.** Undergraduate and graduate students in a variety of fields (social work, computer science, public policy) bring staff time and expertise to the program. Their functions have included team training, group facilitation, website development, evaluation, research, policy analysis, and more.
- **Federally-funded work-study positions help staff the team.** Work-study students make meaningful—and affordable—contributions to YLAT, developing and maintaining the team’s web site, publishing newsletters, planning events, and assuming administrative tasks. Most times, the work-study positions are filled by former youth in care, who are typically eligible for federal financial aid while attending college. These students particularly benefit, as they gain a paid work experience with personal meaning in a uniquely supportive environment.
- **YLAT team “lessons” inform classroom learning.** As YLAT moves the theories of youth development into application—and applies those theories to the context of child welfare systems reform—the team has learned many lessons. That learning has been integrated into academic courses at the University, giving students an opportunity to see the practical application of their studies and keeping the team connected to best thinking in the field.
- **Faculty and researchers apply their knowledge to team concerns.** YLAT has benefited from time and expertise from a host of researchers, faculty, students, and interns who assist with particular projects.
- **The team gains credibility as part of an academic community.** As part of a university, Muskie School staff are challenged by their peers to incorporate research, maintain fidelity to best practices, and examine their results as they work with the team.
- **Synergies arise with caseworker training, which is led by the university.** Maine’s Child Welfare Training Institute is also based at the Muskie School. As the Training Institute develops new caseworkers, offers continuing education, and trains prospective foster/adoptive parents, engaging youth as co-trainers in each of these forums has been a natural process. The location of both programs at one University has also created a deep knowledge of and strong set of relationships with DHHS.

While youth, the Muskie School, and DHHS each have a distinct role to play, it is the synergy of their interaction that truly generates YLAT's success. In summary, the three-way partnership's depth and structure:

- **Facilitates youth involvement**, as caseworkers and transition workers who know the youth well aid in their recruitment and transportation.
- **Keeps the door open between YLAT youth and powerful policy leaders**, increasing YLAT's impact and effectiveness. DHHS benefits from incorporating consumers' voices in their decision-making, policy development and program improvement.
- **Expands YLAT's reach**, as every DHHS case-worker hears from YLAT youth as a required part of their training.
- **Provides a consistent, secure funding stream**, as evidenced by maintaining their leadership and commitment through three changes in administration at the Department.
- **Helps manage costs**, as various public agency staff include YLAT in their routine job descriptions, providing necessary staff hours without increasing the magnitude of the YLAT budget.
- **Permits a degree of independence between the team and the Department**, giving YLAT members the freedom to set their own agenda and pursue their own organizational relationships with the legislature and other community stakeholders.

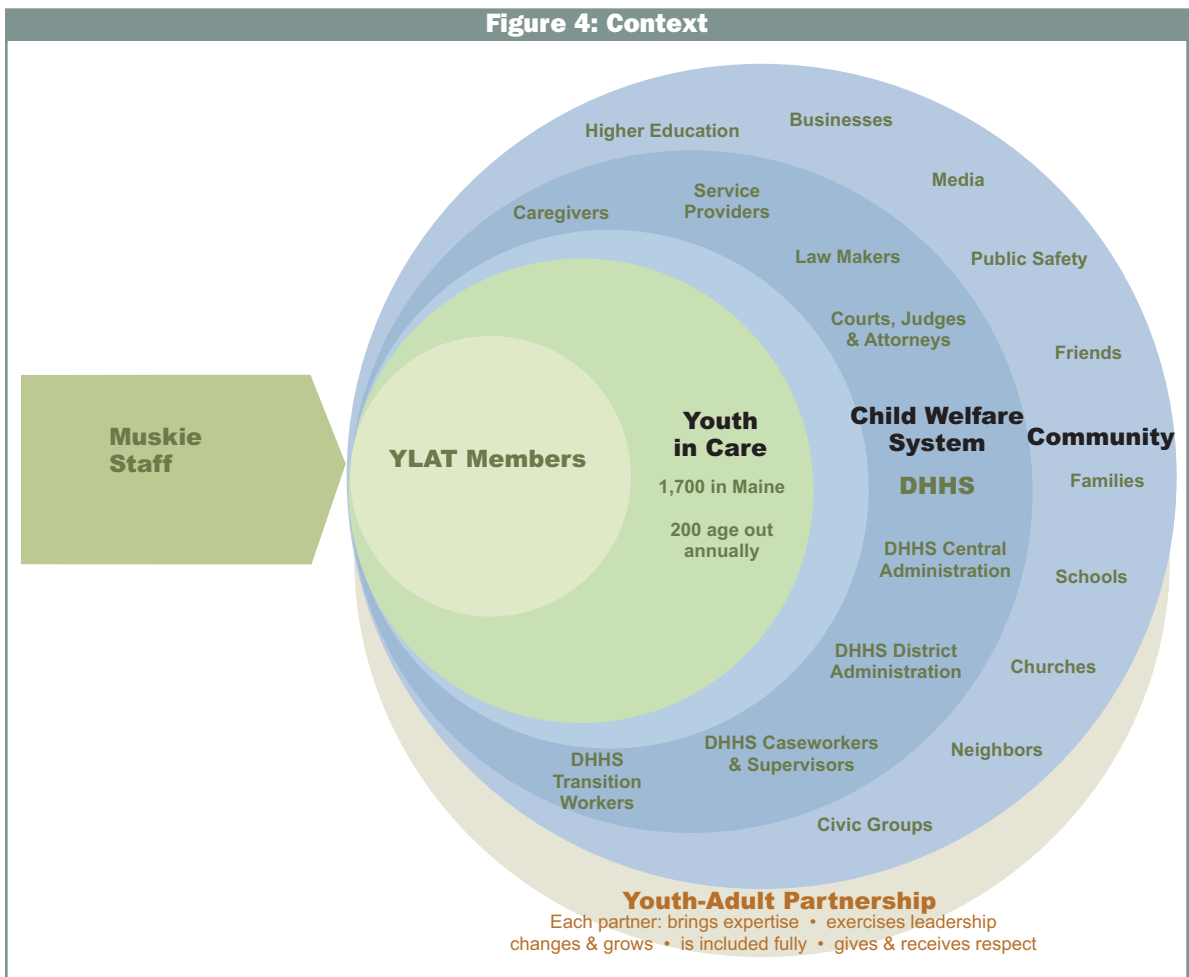
We all sat down as a group and talked about what we want to have changed in DHHS...it made me feel like my voice was heard, and important, like somebody does care about what we think. Because it is our life.

-Youth

Context

The core partners operate within the larger community

Notably, the visual model for YLAT does not feature only the three central partners of the program. Instead, youth members are depicted as a subset of the larger circle of youth in care. DHHS is part of a larger child welfare system, which surrounds all youth in care, including the YLAT youth. All of them are surrounded by – and indeed, are part of – the circle of the entire community (see Figure 4: Context). The boundaries of all of the groups in the YLAT model are soft, intentionally shown to blend into one another, yet remain distinct. This section discusses the context in which YLAT operates, providing more detail about youth in care, the Maine child welfare system, and their relationship with the surrounding community.



Youth in Care

On a given day, the State of Maine has approximately 1,750 children in its custody. Of them, approximately 600 are age 14 and up. Another 500 families have open cases with the Department. The median length of stay in foster care is just under 16 months.

Among Maine's older youth in care, around 5 percent live with relatives, 35 percent with foster families, 11 percent in independent living programs or on their own, and 26 percent in residential care of some type. Increasing percentages (64 to 82 percent) of youth in care have 2 or fewer placements while in DHHS care, though if youth remain in care longer than 2 years that percentage goes down dramatically (26 percent).

Child Welfare System

The child welfare system in Maine is state-administered. The Commissioner of the Department of Human Services is a political appointee, reporting to the Governor. DHHS is a broad-reaching agency, with a 3-billion-dollar budget and responsibilities that include child protective services, child support enforcement, adult protective services and temporary assistance to families. Within DHHS, the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) has primary responsibility for child welfare matters as well as children's behavioral health and early childhood services. It is led by the OCFS Director, who is one of four directors reporting to the DHHS Commissioner.

All DHHS functions across the state share a district structure, with the state divided into eight districts. Within child welfare, each of these districts is managed by a local Program Administrator. Caseworkers and casework supervisors are based in these offices. OCFS employs approximately 300 case-carrying workers.

Of course, DHHS staff are not—by themselves—the child welfare system. The courts play an important role. In Maine, they are organized as the Family Division of the Maine District Court. Judges preside over child welfare matters, with 20 Attorneys General employed across the state to represent the interests of DHHS, and court appointed or privately hired attorneys to represent parents. Most youth have a Guardian Ad Litem appointed by the court to argue for their best interests, who is either an attorney or a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

Private agencies are contracted to provide mental health counseling, foster care placement, group care placement, preservation and reunification services with families and transportation services.

Community

Maine consists of 16 counties with 22 cities, 432 towns, and 34 plantations. The population of Maine is approximately 1.3 million. The majority of the state's population (67%) resides in the southern 8 counties. Maine also has three Reservations: Indian Island, Indian Township Reservation, and Pleasant Point Indian Reservation, with four federally-recognized Indian Tribes – Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot. The geographic area of the state is over 33,000 square miles, by far the largest state in New England.

Forty-four percent of the state's population is age 45 and older, whereas twenty-four percent are under the age of 20. The median household income is \$45,888, with a per capita personal income of \$33,962. The poverty rate for families is 13.6%. The state's population is 96.8% white, one percent African American, one percent Asian, and less than one percent Native American. Roman Catholic is the predominant faith, though over 63% of Mainers were not counted as members of any religious organization.

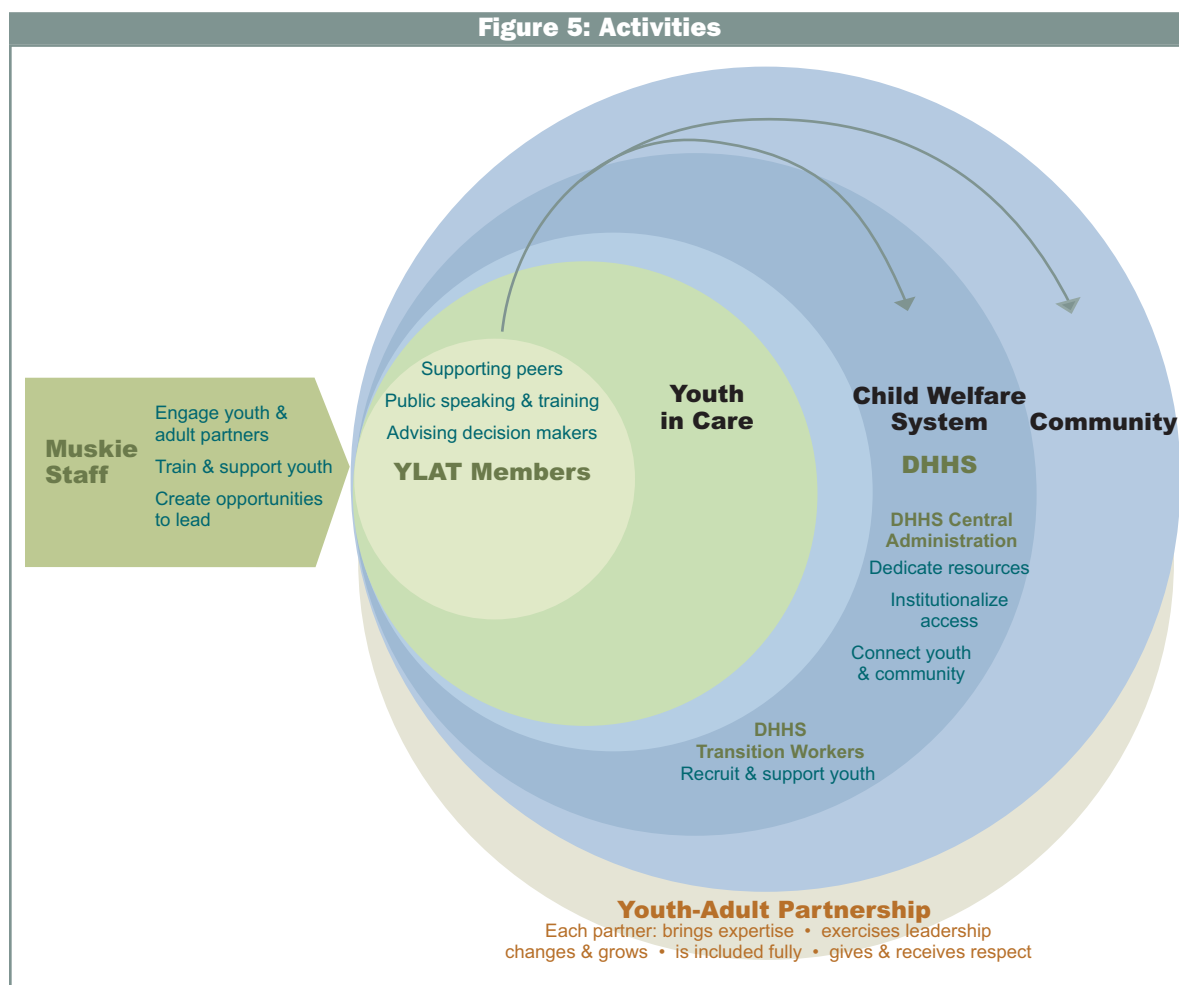
Maine manufacturing has been predominantly in the forest industry, though others include construction, state and local government, retail, finance, insurance and real estate. Maine's fisheries have been an important part of the state's economy, as has tourism and farming.

Approximately 85% of Mainers have completed their high school education, with over 40% going on to start a college education, though only 20% have completed a bachelor's degree. Since 1968, the state's public colleges and universities have been incorporated into a single University of Maine System. The state also operates the Maine Maritime Academy at Castine and the Maine Community College System, comprised of six community colleges. Maine is home to 16 private colleges and professional schools, with Bowdoin College, Colby College, and Bates College being the most widely known and highly regarded.

Activities

The heart of YLAT

YLAT’s core partners – Muskie staff, youth, and DHHS – keep a busy calendar of activities. This section of the paper describes the key activities that are at the heart of YLAT (see Figure 5: Activities).



Muskie School

In the visual model, the Muskie School staff are the only group shown in the shape of an arrow. It is their actions that keep the team active and maintain its momentum. Without their activities, the program simply would not exist. The daily activities of the Muskie School staff are vast and varied, but can be grouped into three categories – engaging youth and adult partners, training and supporting youth, and creating opportunities to lead.

Engage Youth and Adult Partners

For Muskie School staff, the first step in engagement is recruiting youth to participate on the team. A small portion of that recruitment is direct, when YLAT staff members meet youth in care and ask them to consider coming to a meeting. More often, young people learn about YLAT from another adult partner – most frequently, their DHHS caseworker or transition worker. Muskie School staff are quick to explain they could never do it all themselves, and getting one caseworker enthused to reach out to the youth on his or her caseload is much more effective than trying to reach the same number of youth personally.

Since recruitment relies heavily on DHHS' frontline staff, a big part of the Muskie staff members' job is to form relationships with them. Fortunately, each new DHHS caseworker meets the YLAT team as a part of his or her pre-service training (more on this below). In addition to hearing from the youth, this is also a first chance for caseworkers to learn about the team. Staff also make visits to local offices, attend DHHS meetings, meet with supervisors, and continually spread the word to caseworkers about the importance of YLAT and their role in supporting the team. Consistent presence and open communication are essential, as the staff relies on caseworkers to tell youth in care that YLAT exists, encourage them to try it, and arrange transportation for them to get to team gatherings.

Engaging youth means more than just recruitment. Perhaps more important than finding youth who are interested in participating is creating an atmosphere that keeps them excited to return. At any gathering, team-building activities and food are always included. Personal check-ins are an official part of every meeting. Bringing fun to every team event is expressly part of the Muskie staff members' jobs. Keeping meetings enjoyable also aids in recruitment, as team members often tell other young people they meet to join in.

Train and Support Youth

Just as having fun is incorporated in every YLAT gathering, so too is learning. Muskie School staff include an education and training component in every team gathering – with team members participating in the development and selection of topics. The nature of the education encompasses a broad range – from experienced team members informally sharing their lessons learned at a recent public speaking engagement to formal workshops planned to help build specific skills.

Training of a more formal nature is incorporated into the team's two annual statewide meetings, the Youth Summit and the Annual Conference for teens in foster care. School holidays and special events throughout the year also often incorporate a formal training topic. In organizing these, Muskie staff adhere to a few principles to keep the experience youth-friendly. First, youth team members join adults as co-trainers and the staff members who are not leading the training join the team members as training participants. The message is

not that adults teach young people, but that everyone learns together. Second, the approach to skill-building workshops minimizes lectures. Instead, lessons are hands-on, full of opportunities to brainstorm, role play, work in small groups, and practice new skills. Third, the training agenda is set by the team, with youth determining what topics and skills they would like to pursue further.

Most Popular Training Topics for YLAT Youth

- Public Speaking
- Understanding the Child Welfare System
- Working the Chain of Command
- Active Listening
- Shaping Your Message So Adults Can Hear
- The Legislative Process
- Permanent Family Connections

Whether the training is formal or informal, Muskie staff are serious about their responsibility to make team participation—and in particular, public speaking—a safe and positive experience for the youth. Helping youth to abstract their personal experiences is critical. With staff support, youth grow skilled at focusing on how their personal experiences relate to larger lessons—improving child welfare for the next generation, even if they are not resolving their own situations.

In gathering with other young people in care, “checking-in,” and sharing personal stories, YLAT members often raise serious emotional concerns. Muskie staff members and DHHS Transition Workers are all trained and make a point of following-up with young people who they hear are struggling. Often, this support involves helping the youth identify who he or she can rely on when facing tough, emotional challenges. When situations merit, staff reach out to DHHS caseworkers and supervisors to address a team member’s needs—or if possible, help the team member to do so for him or herself.

Supporting youth also involves extensive coaching, to maximize the youths’ chances for success in the leadership roles they take on—whether that role is conducting a literature review, preparing a meeting agenda, or rehearsing a speech. Supporting youth members can be simply logistical: keeping adult volunteers informed so that rides are provided; or sharing background information about the child welfare system, in youth-friendly terms rather than acronyms. It means truly recognizing youths’ contributions by providing financial stipends, reference letters, certificates of achievement, and direct feedback in a warm, empowering and authentic manner.

Create Opportunities to Lead

With youth recruited, prepared, and supported, they need an audience for their message. Creating opportunities for team members to lead is a vital staff activity, and they have been successful in securing a variety of routine and one-time opportunities that are discussed in greater detail in the section on YLAT member activities, below. This section addresses a few of the considerations and strategies employed by the Muskie School staff as they structure leadership opportunities.

Creating leadership opportunities is as much about the format and tone of the opportunities as it is about the prominence of the venue or influence of the audience. Muskie school staff strive to keep the team's agenda youth-driven, positioning themselves as facilitators and teachers rather than as advocates. Any messages the youth bring forward are the messages those youth wish to express; their thoughts are not screened by the Muskie School or DHHS. While the Muskie School staff may sometimes serve on panels to speak about the team, its model, and its values, messages about the needs of youth in care are always formulated and delivered by team members.

Creating leadership opportunities also involves preparing the audience. Muskie School staff provide the introduction for youth-led training, emphasizing that adults must be thoughtful in their questions and that youth may decline to discuss particular topics, as they see fit. Moreover, YLAT staff continue to emphasize to child welfare leaders that the goal of hearing from youth is to learn, rather than to discover shortcomings of particular caseworkers or bring about punitive actions. One relatively simple—yet highly effective—approach has been to arrange opportunities for youth speakers outside of their own DHHS district. In this way, youth are less fearful that their personal caseworkers will get angry or in trouble if they describe unmet needs.

Recently, Muskie School staff have been working to secure “seats at the table” on the planning groups and task forces that impact youth policies. These committees usually meet routinely, come together during business hours, require background knowledge, and follow a complex set of meeting norms. In short, they are adult-led and relatively inflexible—requiring a different set of supports from other YLAT activities. But the value, for both youth and adults, has compelled Muskie School staff to strive to provide the necessary assistance so that committee opportunities for youth members can continue and expand.

It's really done a lot. Being a part of YLAT makes you feel stronger; knowing you're making a difference makes you feel good about yourself.

–Youth

YLAT Youth Members

Young people join YLAT for different reasons, with varied interests and abilities – and availability to the team. They are shown in the visual model as part of the larger population of youth in care, and the boundary between the two circles is not solid. From its inception, YLAT has been and remains a low-barriers activity. Youth are considered “members” from the first time they attend a YLAT activity. From there, young people are free to participate if, when, and how they want, choosing their own level of engagement. Team members vary greatly in the intensity of their commitment to YLAT, and that intensity changes for individuals over time. The routine activities of YLAT members are loosely grouped into three categories – supporting peers, public speaking and training, and advising decision makers. As the model shows, their activities are targeted at audiences in the child welfare system and the larger community.

Supporting Peers

At the most fundamental level, YLAT brings together young people in care. Many members say that until they joined YLAT, they never knew another young person who was living in placement. With team membership, they have the chance to talk with others in similar circumstances. Exchanging phone numbers and email addresses is encouraged, as is staying in touch outside of official team gatherings. As members participate with the team longer – and even grow into adulthood – they often take on a more formal mentoring role with younger youth. Early in the team’s development, concerns were raised about privacy, confidentiality, and even safety, if youth in care had contact with one another outside the team. But youth members, with the support of Muskie School staff, have insisted that these connections are essential – a normal part of teenage life. As such, conditions on who should be friends or the nature of their contact are not negotiated by the team, but by the young people and their caregivers, as is the case in other teens’ friendships.

More formally, YLAT members help their peers – on the team and among the larger group of youth in care – learn what to expect from and how to navigate the child welfare system. They created a handbook which is distributed to all young people in care in Maine, and have updated the handbook three times. They recently completed and distributed a Youth Bill of Rights, which includes a two-page list of rights and responsibilities, plus a more detailed publication explaining each of them.

*It means so much
to know I have
so much support
and there are
others who are in
the same boat.*

–Youth

Public Speaking and Training

When YLAT first became a year-round team and embraced a leadership and advisory role, its original strategy was public speaking and training. These remain essential activities—and even established requirements—of the child welfare system.

- **Caseworker Training.** For more than 15 years, YLAT youth have participated in the pre-service training of every new caseworker, as well as a variety of continuing education trainings. DHHS staff explain that hearing from youth in training is particularly influential around areas of case practice where they have discretion, but might be risk-averse. For example, they are reminded of the importance of getting youth to live with relatives, even when a group placement might be easier.
- **Foster/Adoptive Parent Training.** Youth also participate in the training of new foster and adoptive parents in the state. Hearing from teens during training was formalized in part because it appears to be influential with prospective caregivers, who increasingly consider fostering or adopting older kids. In a handful of cases, the youth who spoke was later fostered or adopted by the parents that he or she had trained.
- **Community Events.** At the invitation of local DHHS offices, service providers, and community groups, YLAT members keep a busy calendar of speaking events. During 2008, the team spoke at more than 30 events, reaching an audience of more than 500 people.
- **Statewide Forums.** Within the State of Maine, YLAT members are highly regarded for the impact of their presentations. Their reputation has gained them speaking opportunities, including the Maine Justice for Youth Task Force, GAL Training, the Maine Judicial and Child Welfare statewide conference and the annual conference for teens in foster care.
- **National Presentations.** The quality of YLAT members' presentations, along with the reliable support they receive from Muskie School staff, has brought the team national recognition as well. They have been featured as speakers in several forums and conferences organized by national leaders (including 4-H, the National Resource Center for Youth Services, and the Child Welfare League of America).

One of the big impacts is when people actually experience the YLAT team in action. People think, "Wow, they're really competent."

–Administrator

Advising Decision Makers

Young people in placement have a large group of adults – caseworkers, supervisors, foster parents, judges, lawyers, and service providers – making decisions about their lives. Advising these adults about what youth in care most need and want during their time in placement is a primary activity of YLAT members. They reach these influential adults through:

- **Fireside Chats.** A group of youth meets at least annually with senior managers at DHHS to give them feedback. The format is informal, with youth and managers gathering around a conference table over pizza, asking and answering questions of one another. Senior leaders report that the fireside chats help them to measure whether policy changes are reaching practice. They have found fireside chats particularly valuable in clarifying behavioral health and medication policies, where policy revisions now allow youth more opportunities to make decisions about their own health, in the hopes of avoiding overmedication and the blanket use of therapy for all young people in care.
- **Listening Panels.** YLAT youth also periodically share their ideas with influential policy and community leaders across the state, using an approach the team has dubbed the “listening panel.” They have spoken to the Governor, First Lady, a bank president, the CEO of LL Bean, the State Attorney General, and a state Supreme Court justice, among others. In these listening panels, youth prepare by identifying top priorities and determining how to convey what makes them priorities in the lives of youth in care. Youth incorporate their personal experiences, along with information from other states and data from formal sources. Once they have fully outlined their concerns, positions, and recommendations, youth practice how to present this information in an effective manner.
- **Statewide Committee Participation.** YLAT members are increasingly asked to sit on boards and committees, lending their expertise around emerging reforms or particular policy matters. A current example of this is the “Antipsychotic Drug Use in Foster Youth” Workgroup. A former youth in care, who is active in YLAT, participates in this committee, along with a Muskie School staff member. Her participation allows information to be provided back to other YLAT members and allows her to seek team feedback that can be shared with the workgroup.
- **National Committee Participation.** YLAT members have been engaged as members of several national committees and organizations, such as the National Foster Youth Advisory Council, comprised of youth in care representatives from several states. Another YLAT member served as a member of the CARE Alliance, focused on the disproportional rate of minorities in child welfare. In 2009, a former youth in Maine care and YLAT member served as an intern in Senator John Kerry’s office through the Congressional Coalition for Adoption Internship.

- **Interviews and Consultations.** YLAT youth have a strong positive reputation around the state for their ability to advise difficult policy decisions. As such, when child welfare reviews are conducted, they are often asked to lend their expertise. The Maine State Legislature’s Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability completed a review of the state’s Guardian Ad Litem program and YLAT youth were formally interviewed as part of the review; their perspectives were included in the report and recommendations. Maine has now completed the first two rounds of the federal Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) process. YLAT youth participated in both rounds and hold a seat on the Steering Committee overseeing the Program Improvement Plan (PIP). Because of the quality of their participation, the team was asked to complete a paper advising other states on how they can get youth involved in their own CFSRs.

DHHS Leadership and Staff

As the state’s key decision-making authority on child welfare, the DHHS administration and staff have embraced YLAT and made activities to support it part of regular business.

Dedicate Funding and Resources

Without DHHS’ commitment, YLAT would not have been founded, nor would it continue to exist. While the team does enjoy some outside grant funding, the majority of its resources have come from a cooperative agreement funded by the state. As the state faced significant budget reductions over the past several years, none of those reductions have been passed on to YLAT. In addition to the direct funding, DHHS leaders have included responsibilities to YLAT in the job descriptions of their own staff.

I’ve been impressed by how much they [youth] know and how much they’re willing to do . . . they’re pretty resilient.

-Administrator

Institutionalize Youth Voice and Access

Central administrators regularly consult YLAT youth, arranging annual fireside chats, attending the two statewide conferences, and calling in YLAT youth on additional policy topics as they arise.

The mandate that every new caseworker and prospective foster or adoptive parent be trained by youth is embedded in state policy. Working with YLAT youth is deeply embedded into the organizational culture, and has remained a priority through three DHHS Commissioners.

Connect YLAT to the Community

DHHS provides critical support to the partnership between the community and YLAT youth. This is true in the wider child welfare community, where DHHS leaders remind their court, legislative, and service agency partners to tap YLAT youth for training or speaking engagements. It is also true in the community in the broader sense, where DHHS leaders help make connections between YLAT youth and neighborhood residents, volunteers, faith groups, and media.

Recruit and Support Team Members

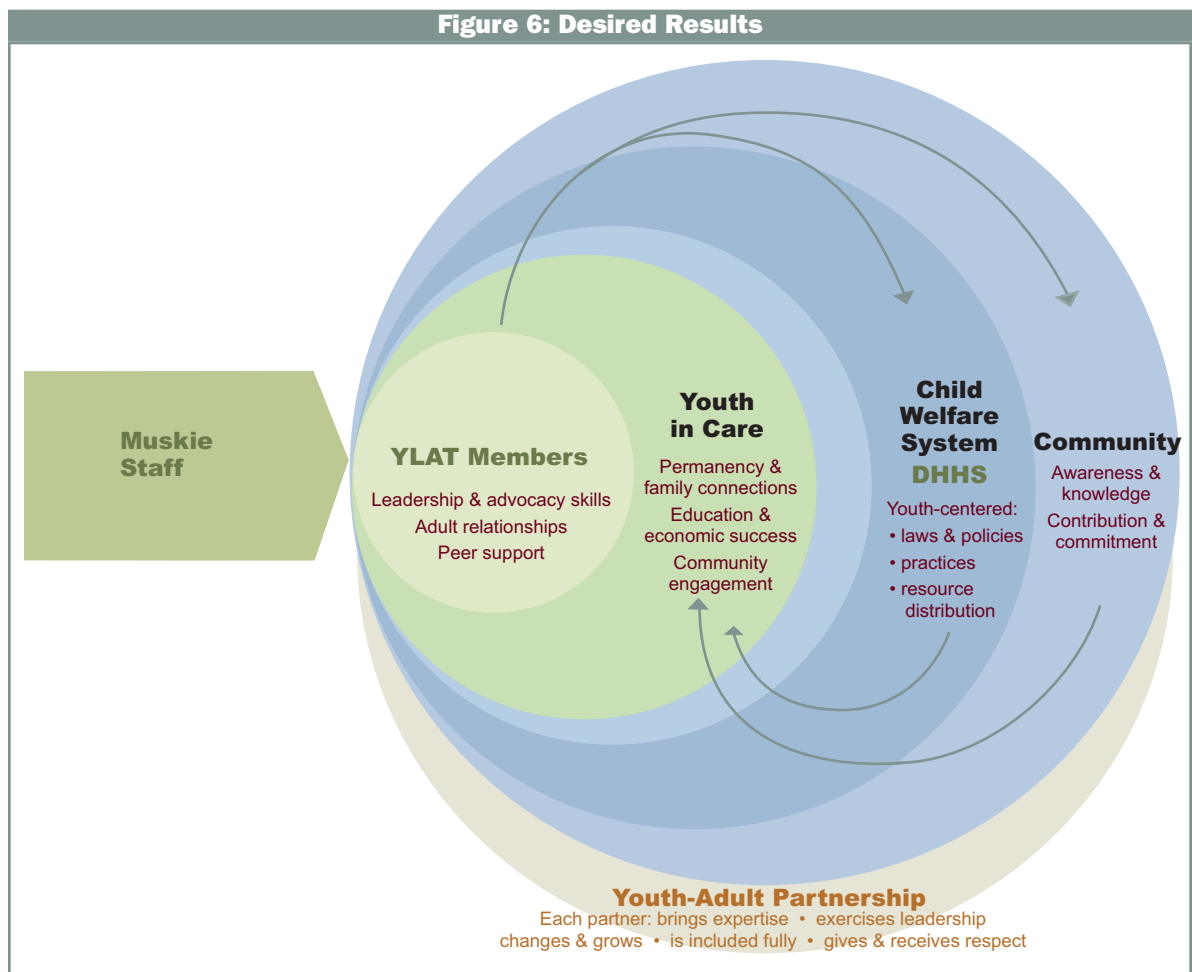
With only five Muskie School staff members (all part-time – the equivalent of 2.5 full-time staff) working directly with youth on the team, the size and scope of its reach could not be achieved. The team relies heavily on the time dedicated by Transition Workers, for whom YLAT is a formal part of the job. The Transition Workers are co-hosts at monthly regional team meetings. They assist with the agenda, help secure space, arrange (or even provide) transportation, and support the youth attending. In fact, without their involvement, a team would scarcely exist, since they are the most frequent “recruiters,” bringing new youth onto the team. Caseworkers play a similar role in recruiting, transporting, and supporting youth participation on the team, although for these staff, the role is more voluntary and less formalized.

Desired Results

The benefits of YLAT

Among the most important reasons the team has developed this white paper and visual model was to understand their results. After twenty years of teen conferences and ten years as an organization, what does the team hope has changed? Who benefits from YLAT? What are the team's most important achievements? How do team activities lead to the desired results?

In examining the logic behind their approach, YLAT leaders realized that they strive for results on many fronts (see Figure 6: Desired Results). First, they want outcomes to improve for the youth who participate as team members. Team members, in turn, change the child welfare system, making it more youth-centered in its laws and policies, practices,



culture, and resource distribution. The youth on the team also promote positive change in the community, which becomes more responsive to young people in care. Ultimately, with a youth-centered child welfare system and engaged community, the life prospects for all young people in care improve—increasing their chances for family connections, economic success, and productive lives as community members.

This section of the paper describes the desired results of YLAT activities and includes examples of many of the team’s successes over the past ten years. Thus far, the team has tracked these results by collecting narrative data: documenting their intensions and illustrating success through the stories. In a few areas, more concrete evaluation data is available. YLAT keeps basic data on their team’s processes and has generated additional information through periodic research projects. Results are organized by the group they impact: youth team members, the child welfare system, the community, and youth in care. The section does not include outcome data, although both the promise and challenge of having such information is discussed.

YLAT Members

The first and most direct beneficiaries of the YLAT program are its youth members. For them, the goals are enhanced leadership and advocacy skills, adult relationships, and peer support. This section explains each of the intended results and includes a number of quotes given by young people who participated in focus groups, illustrating how YLAT has impacted their lives.

Leadership and Advocacy Skills

YLAT members are trained, and then have real-world opportunities to practice leadership and advocacy skills. As youth learn how policies are made, strategize about message delivery, and stand before an audience, they gain lasting skills. Youth on the team have found that these skills not only help them pursue YLAT goals, but improve their ability to advocate in their personal lives as well. Further, these types of skills are extremely valuable in the context of education and employment. YLAT provides a strong leadership experience to list on a resume, to add to their portfolio, or discuss in an interview.

[YLAT] gave me some confidence in what I was doing and it really helped me to understand that it mattered, so that made me make sure that I followed through, and it gave me motivation and support in what I was doing.

– Youth

Adult Relationships

Participation in the team also enhances the adult relationships of youth members. The Muskie School staff, DHHS transition workers, and other adult partners of the team get to know members well. From their first participation in a YLAT meeting or annual conference, YLAT members are reminded that the team's adult partners are available to talk, help, brainstorm, and support.

Youth on the team describe their relationship with Muskie School staff and adult partners as different from the relationships they are accustomed to with other adults. In the context of YLAT, they are recognized as equals. Within the team, and when they go out into the community with their stories, youth members are recognized as "experts" on foster care. For young people, this can be the first time in their lives that they recognize the personal strength their time in placement has pushed them to gain. It can also be the first time they are formally acknowledged by adults as having unique and important knowledge to contribute.

Particularly because of YLAT's connections to the University of Southern Maine, YLAT members also gain exposure to a university community. Many YLAT members cite participation in the team as pivotal in their career and educational decisions. YLAT staff frequently provide personal and professional recommendations on behalf of their team members. For young people in placement—whose family and school connections can be unstable—these adult connections are an important benefit of the program.

Evaluation

YLAT has enjoyed many successes and been fortunate to garner state and national attention for the team's achievements. Often, the messages that team members bring to the child welfare community and public serve as the story behind the statistics that administrators and media routinely see. Still, a significant remaining challenge for the team has been to quantify their own results, concretely describing and documenting both the process and outcome data associated with their efforts. To evaluate their progress, the Muskie School staff have collected narrative data documenting the stories of what's been achieved and convening focus groups to examine impact.

This white paper represents a first step of the team toward stronger evaluation. With a more defined model, Muskie School staff can begin to decide which of their intended results are most important to track and what methods are available for doing so.

Evaluation continues 

*They see us in a way, not as children,
but that we can teach them.*

– Youth

Process Evaluation

Using the “Activities” listed in the visual model, the team’s next step will be to collect process data to help answer the following types of questions:

- How many youth participate in YLAT opportunities? How were they recruited? How often do they attend? How long does their membership with the team continue?
- How many adult partners—community members and DHHS employees—participate in YLAT opportunities? How were they recruited? How often do they attend? How long does their volunteerism with the team continue?
- How many social, training, and support activities are offered to YLAT youth? How many youth participate?
- How many speaking engagements are completed by YLAT youth? How many youth participate? How many audience members do they reach, and what are the job and/or community roles of those audience members?
- On how many occasions do YLAT youth advise child welfare decision makers? How many youth participate? How many leaders, managers, legislators, judges, attorneys, etc. hear their message?

The team currently keeps basic attendance information on youth as well as tracking speaking events and audience sizes. Based on that experience, the Muskie School staff have learned that their tracking will yield more valuable information when their data collection can follow each youth who joins the team and the nature and frequency of his or her individual participation over time. This information could then be analyzed alongside demographic information about the participants, suggesting which youth are most likely to join, how long they continue to participate, and what activities attract the greatest participation. It could also later be combined with placement, education, career, health, and mental health information as part of an outcome evaluation.

Collecting process information on the team is certainly important. Still, it has a major limitation: process data is focused on the youth who are on the team. While YLAT is focused on improving results for them, its true purpose is systemic reform—impacting all of the young people in care.

Evaluation continues 

Peer Support

Feeling alone is common among youth in care. At school, they are usually the only person in their class who lives in a foster or group home. Many feel that they have personally done something wrong—or at least that adults in their lives (teachers, parents or friends) perceive them to have gotten in trouble in order to have ended up in care. Participation in YLAT is, for many, the first time they meet other young people in care. This shared background is frequently the basis of profound connections. An important outcome of the program is that YLAT members have one another to turn to, gaining friendship and support. For youth in care, the chance to help someone else—when they are usually the ones who are seen as needing help—is another important benefit.

Outcome Evaluation

To answer questions about how YLAT impacts all youth in care, an outcome evaluation will be necessary. But the collection of outcome data is an aspiration that remains for the future. Having the defined model articulated in this white paper is the team's first step in that direction. Using the "results" listed in the model, the team hopes to answer some of the following types of questions:

- Are the leadership and advocacy skills of YLAT members enhanced through their participation on the team? Do they enjoy greater peer support and/or stronger adult relationships as a result of their participation?
- Is the child welfare system more youth-centered because of YLAT? Are laws and policies, practices, and resource distribution improved because of the team?
- Is the broad community more aware and knowledgeable about youth in care because of YLAT? Do community members make greater contributions and commitments to youth in care because of the team?
- Most importantly, are youth in care better off because of YLAT? Are they more likely to have permanency and family connections? Educational and economic success? Connections to their communities?

These are all significant questions, with no easy answers or simple approach to data collection. Most critically, answering these questions suggests the need for comparison: to the time before a youth joined the team, to those who did not participate in the team, to youth in other states, to community members who did not hear the message. Even when a good comparison could be made, YLAT does not exist in a vacuum. They have been one part of a large-scale reform in Maine. With so many intervening factors, demonstrating whether and to what extent YLAT activities increased permanency for all youth is a challenge. Certainly, for a lean organization that is focused on direct work with youth, dedicating resources to an outcome evaluation is a significant undertaking.

When outcome evaluation is launched, the Muskie School staff will certainly rely on their relationships within the larger University of Southern Maine. The ever-improving administrative data system maintained by their partners at DHHS is also certain to be an important source of information.

In an evaluation of the 2009 Teen Conference, 100% of youth participants identified that they met others they could relate to, while 87% gained a sense of belonging through their participation.

*They're more responsive. Our ideas go
into action rather than just on paper.*

- Youth

Child Welfare System

YLAT has been central in helping DHHS, the courts, and service providers promote youth-centered changes in laws and policies, practices, and resource distribution. In this realm, YLAT's results are best illustrated with specific examples of the team's achievements.

Youth-centered Laws and Policies

The DHHS policy team maintains frequent contact with YLAT youth, testing their youth-related policies with team members before the policies are adopted and even bringing team members in to assist with drafting policy language. At times, the impetus to create or reshape a policy has originated with the team. Legislative and policy results have included:

- **Sibling Placement and Visitation.** As discussed further in the case study below, when the team spoke with the Commissioner about the trauma of being separated from their siblings in placement, they were called in to shape a policy revision. YLAT team members helped draft the legislation and came together more than a dozen times to shape the final language. When policy alone was not enough to ensure that siblings in care were able to visit siblings remaining with the parent, the team lobbied successfully for new legislation.
- **Extension of Care.** When the decades-old policy and process for keeping youth in care from age 18 to 21, if they wish to stay, came up for review, the Department and YLAT worked together on the revision. Requirements of the caseworker to explain the option, as well as the paper work related to the "V-9" process, was changed based on YLAT influence. Most importantly, at YLAT's request, the Department changed policy so that if a young person initially chooses not to sign a V-9 agreement and exits care at 18, he or she can subsequently petition to reopen the case.
- **Case Record Confidentiality.** YLAT youth influenced the Department not to implement a proposed policy change, which would have allowed birth parents to share case record information with the media. As the youth argued, they want to be consulted before information contained in their case records is publicly released.
- **Permission to Participate.** YLAT youth found participating in school activities, such as sports and field trips, was always a hassle. Their caseworker needed to sign a permission slip for each event. At times, the slow turnaround time on obtaining signatures kept youth from joining in activities. Similarly, to spend the night at a friend's house required permission from the caseworker, who often times wanted a background check on the friend and friend's family before agreeing. Because of youth feedback, the Department changed policy, creating a single, blanket permis-

sion slip for caseworkers to sign and allowing foster parents to make decisions about whether youth could participate in school and social activities. The Department and YLAT also worked with the state legislature to have this policy change approved.

Youth-centered Practices

YLAT members influence daily practice by training every new caseworker and foster or adoptive parent in the state. Their panels are reviewed as among the most impactful of the entire training curriculum. Workers explain that in hearing from the YLAT youth, they are reminded of the small ways that they can support young people. Prospective caregivers are more likely to foster and adopt older children after hearing from the YLAT team. Another way that YLAT has influenced practice in the state was by bringing Camp To Belong to Maine. The summer camp brings together siblings who are separated in foster care for a week of outdoor activities, bonding, and fun – and is discussed in greater detail in the case study.

Youth-centered Resource Distribution

YLAT has testified during state budget hearings on behalf of DHHS and foster and adoptive families. They have also worked with the state legislature through three rounds of legislation on higher-education tuition support for youth in care. The first time, YLAT helped create the law, which provides tuition reimbursement at any public state college or university. Maine was only the third state in the country to pass such a law; most states have now followed suit. In the second round, YLAT increased the number of slots available in the program. The third time, YLAT pushed the legislature to extend tuition waiver benefits to youth adopted from foster care, eliminating a major disincentive to the adoption of older youth.

Replication: New York State

In 2003, the State of New York requested YLAT assistance in the development of their state's youth leadership team. The YLAT model was seen as fitting for this county-run state even though Maine and New York are different (demographically, in how their respective child welfare systems are organized, and in other ways).

Working with county representatives, YLAT staff, OCFS staff and youth provided technical assistance on the history, purpose and detailed programmatic aspects required to implement a successful youth leadership program. The result is that New York has a successful youth leadership team called Youth In Progress (YIP). YIP's organization closely resembles the YLAT model and has been successful in engaging youth across the State of New York and accomplishing great things – advocating for siblings, creating a handbook for youth in care, promoting youth having a voice in the court process and confronting stereotypes of youth in care.

www.youthinprogress.org/

*If people are asking for your input,
you feel like they are listening.*

– Youth

Community

Young people in care live their lives much like other teens: they go to school, join sports and clubs, belong to faith groups, interact with neighbors, and form friendships. Recognizing that as much or more of the life of a young person in care takes place outside of the child welfare system, YLAT has taken steps to engage the broader community. The results have been greater awareness and increased knowledge about the needs of youth in care in the general population, as well as increased contributions and lasting commitments to youth in care by some of those who hear the message.

Awareness and Knowledge

Youth leaders have engaged in different activities to increase awareness and knowledge among community members. Youth in care have spoken to summer camp programs, employers, educators, track clubs and more. These public speaking events have been vehicles to create deeper understanding of the reasons that youth enter foster care, the types of experiences they may have while in care, and the challenges they face in transitioning from care.

Youth leaders have also participated in media events to raise awareness. A variety of media articles have appeared in Maine newspapers about youth in care preparing for young adulthood, struggling to maintain relationships with siblings, advocating in public policy arenas and advising child welfare systems on program improvements. Publications have included the *Bangor Daily News*, the *Lewiston Sun Journal*, the *Maine Sunday Telegram*, the *Portland Press Herald*, the *Kennebec Journal*, and the *Falmouth Forecaster*. Televised news has covered YLAT members advocating for changes in law, discussing the challenges they face in young adulthood, and promoting programs that help them maintain lifelong family connections, such as Camp To Belong Maine. National media, including the *CBS Evening News*, *Good Morning America*, and Oprah's *O* magazine have also featured YLAT members.

Contribution and Commitment

The activities to increase awareness and deepen knowledge have resulted in the deeper engagement of particular community members, who might otherwise have not known or understood the plight of youth in care. A Vice President at LL Bean joined a prominent child welfare committee in the state after reading a news article about youth attending a summer camp program for siblings who have been separated by foster care. Community members have volunteered to become camp counselors, mentors, fundraisers, event planners and advocates after reading articles about youth at Camp To Belong Maine. A local church became an active resource for youth transitioning from care following a televised news broadcast featuring a youth describing his experience.

Investing time in building relationships and trust leads to sustainable results and positive change. Building community networks is an approach that has been used to build relationships and trust between youth in care and the community. In a southern Maine county, a community network has engaged YLAT youth and alumni to focus on meeting the educational, employment and housing needs of youth transitioning from care. A second networking group in the state's capital has formed to create stronger connections between employers and youth in care. These unique networks are transforming the way youth and community work together while creating opportunities and resources for youth in care.

Youth in Care

How the efforts of YLAT members impact the lives of all youth in care remains the most important – and most elusive – information for the program to track. Youth who participate on the team know that they do so largely to give back. The changes they advocate for at DHHS, within the child welfare system, and through the community may help them directly. Most likely, though, these changes will only come in time to help future generations of young people in care.

YLAT's desired results for all youth in care closely resemble the intended outcomes of various other child welfare programs: permanency and family connections, educational and economic success, and community engagement. The list is necessarily broad because the team envisions vast and wide-reaching improvements for young people in care. However, tracking whether the team is directly responsible for improvements in these areas is difficult. Are all youth in care experiencing better outcomes because of YLAT? Should this be measured relative to the time before the team existed or to youth in other states? Even if a good comparison could be made, YLAT does not exist in a vacuum. They have been only one part of a large-scale reform in Maine.

While acknowledging the challenge to prove the team's impact in these areas, this section describes the three outcomes YLAT intends to improve for all youth in care. The YLAT initiatives that have targeted each outcome are listed, as is evidence of change in these areas.

Youth have become more integrated into decision-making about what happens to youth in care. Their voice is valued and heard.

– Administrator

Permanency and Family Connections

Connections to family has been among the most significant focus areas of team members' advocacy over the past ten years. While the young people may not always use the word "permanency" to describe their goals, the team has worked tirelessly for sibling connections and contact with relatives, addressing placement issues and opportunities for visiting. In the past three years, the team has also joined the formal statewide conversation on permanency, as discussed more completely in the case study. They have weighed in on relative placements, preparation of foster and adoptive caregivers, and approaches to reunification. Their activities have impacted policy, legislation, and training.

During the time that YLAT has had a presence in Maine, DHHS has also undergone dramatic changes, much of it focused on permanency. While the team would never claim credit for what has been a statewide effort, the team is proud to have contributed to reform efforts over the last seven years. These reforms have resulted in the drastic reduction of the numbers of youth living in congregate care (from over 700 to fewer than 250 youth), while increasing the rate and timeliness of reunifying youth with their families (from 47% to over 55%) and increasing the rate and timeliness of youth being adopted or placed with permanent guardianship (from 12% to over 34%), as well as increasing the numbers of youth living with relatives (increasing from 14% to nearly 29%). DHHS now boasts a 67% rate of placing siblings together upon entry into foster care. Previously the rate of separation upon entry into care rivaled that percentage.

Education and Economic Success

As described above, team activities have also impacted educational and economic opportunities for youth in care. Because of the team's advocacy, youth have additional access to financial resources for higher education. They have increased resources, opportunities, and programs for staying in care past age 18. They have made it easier for young people between the ages of 18 and 22 to continue receiving resources and support from DHHS. In 2000, Maine passed a law that provided a tuition waiver for youth in foster care to universities and colleges in the Maine state system. YLAT members' testimony was pivotal to the passage of this law. Since that time there has been a marked increase in the number of youth attending college, specifically due to the resources dedicated to them.

Like the sibling policy, we hear ideas from kids. Intellectually, we knew it was important but raising the issue makes us focus on it.

- Administrator

Maine Youth Transition Collaborative

The Maine Youth Transition Collaborative (MYTC) is a statewide initiative initially funded by the St. Louis-based Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative www.jimcaseyyouth.org and led by the staff at the Muskie School of Public Service in Maine. MYTC is about creating community connections, resources, and youth/adult partnerships to benefit young people in transition from foster care. The Opportunity Passport™ (a financial literacy training and matched savings program) has been available to young people across the state since 2004, and is administered by a nonprofit partner. Since that time over 300 youth have participated, meaning they have received a minimum of eight hours of education related to personal finance management. More than \$330,000 in youth savings/matches have been leveraged to attain assets for these young people. There are currently 135 active members. Outcomes for Opportunity Passport™ are measured by savings, purchases of approved assets, and matches:

1. Education and Training Expenses	Per youth average \$403
Total: \$30,615 youth savings + \$30,615 matched = \$61,230	
2. Housing Costs	Per youth average \$509
Total: \$23,945 youth savings + \$23,945 matched = \$47,890	
3. Investments	Per youth average \$949
Total: \$37,954 youth savings + \$37,954 matched = \$75,908	
4. Car Purchases	Per youth average \$669
Total: \$72,988 youth savings + \$72,988 matched = \$145,977	

Each year the annual Teen Conference provides workshops and information about the various resources to support post secondary education. Evaluations from this conference revealed that 85% of youth participants identified learning about resources to help with education beyond high school.

Community Engagement

Finally, helping all young people in care grow into adulthood connected to their communities is a desired result of the team, and YLAT has been a participant in other community-building efforts around the state.

This white paper represents a first step of the team toward stronger evaluation. With a more defined model, Muskie School staff can begin to decide which of their desired results are most important to track and the methods available for doing so. In the meantime, a lengthy list of media coverage, high-profile speaking engagements, policy changes, and legislative wins speaks to the credibility and power of the team.

Challenges

Areas to improve

As the values of their youth-adult partnership suggest, change and growth is important to the team. While their achievements have been great, the path has not always been easy. Drafting this model and white paper are among several activities that the team has undertaken to push themselves to continue developing. Some of the most central challenges that team members, Muskie staff, and DHHS have to address continually include:

- **Recruiting Youth.** Because of the flexibility of the program and open membership, recruitment is an ongoing priority, but one that does not always receive the attention it deserves. Insufficient recruitment, however, runs the risk of overtaxing the highly engaged youth leaders already on the team.
- **Sustaining Involvement.** The life circumstances of YLAT's youth members is continuously changing. YLAT members, like all teens, have many school, sports, family, and social commitments in their young lives. Maine is large, and much of it is rural. In short, even interested youth can have a hard time staying engaged with YLAT. The team's flexible attitude certainly helps with this challenge, keeping pressure off the youth and encouraging casual participation, as well as deep commitment. Nonetheless, finding creative ways to keep youth coming back, and ensuring a "quorum" of participants at a given event has periodically been a challenge for the team.
- **Securing Funding.** With DHHS as a partner, YLAT has enjoyed a great deal of stability in its funding. Through the past several years, Maine has experienced the same decline in revenue as other states. Many worthy programs have faced significant budget reductions, while YLAT has not; nonetheless, funding remains a challenge. Grant funds have always supplemented the DHHS cooperative agreement, allowing the team to take on special initiatives, fund research projects, or hire short-term staff. The time it takes to apply for these funds can be great, and the returns inconsistent. Yet maintaining relationships with foundations and pursuing a diverse funding base remains a team goal, and a challenge.
- **Evaluating Results.** YLAT maintains a busy calendar of events, spread across a large state, with a small core of Muskie School staff. Emphasizing data tracking and reporting, particularly given the broad activities and desires of the team, is no easy endeavor. Stronger evaluation results would allow the team to improve its strategies and articulate its achievements to prospective funders.

- **Navigating Risk.** The youth who join YLAT have had experiences that make them vulnerable. Because DHHS is a large state agency that maintains custody of these young people, safety is always an essential and critical concern. These factors make it easy to become risk-averse, in an attempt to protect the young people from each other, the community, or the possibility of failure. The Muskie Staff in particular have had to defend their decisions to allow youth to have internet contact with one another, to stay overnight for conferences, or to travel outside their home state. Adult partners strive to return to the value of youth-adult partnerships as a guide in making decisions about what is safe or what poses too great a risk. They also strive to treat team members as “ordinary” teens. Nonetheless, risk is an area of continued debate and requires careful navigation.
- **Defining a Role for Community Members.** Naturally, as YLAT youth make community presentations, they touch the hearts and minds of their audience members. At times, these audience members step forward to help – not just on behalf of youth in care, but specifically with the YLAT team. The team has been challenged in finding the best way to facilitate such volunteerism, whether coming from citizens in the greater community or from child welfare staff who work outside of DHHS. Some of the particular concerns have been procedural – does the volunteer need a background check? At what point in their engagement with the team is this necessary? Does greater administration of the relationship (through applications or background checks) create an artificial tone (and even barrier) to community involvement? Other concerns have been more philosophical in nature: can youth remain as open if DHHS is a partner to the team or if agency staff or community members come to the table? How are the values of youth-adult partnership transmitted to new volunteers? What happens if volunteers have their own agendas or are not able to practice youth-adult partnership as the team intends? The clarity of roles among youth, Muskie School, and DHHS can become more clouded when other community members also desire to become partners.
- **Setting Priorities.** As the team’s recognition has grown, so too has the demand for speaking engagements. At the same time, a maturing team and organization have also revealed the need for evaluation, recruitment, retention, diversified funding sources, and enhanced community engagement. These all take time. Determining what to do, when many options are worthy and resources are limited remains a challenge. Consulting the youth members often helps in setting priorities. Maintaining realistic expectations, and avoiding staff burn-out, is also an important consideration.

- **Living the Values.** Finally, turning the theory of youth-adult partnership into ongoing practice always remains a challenge. Is a particular young person ready to speak in a large venue, even as her placement crumbles? What should DHHS staff say to the team member who argues on behalf of group care or long-term foster care, even as state reforms rapidly diminish it? How should the unwanted flirtation from one team member to another be handled? What happens when DHHS and the Muskie School are locked in tough budget negotiations? The team has no easy answers to these tough questions, but remains committed to working as partners, revisiting their values, and communicating openly to create the best solutions they can – and learning for next time when their decisions do not work as planned.

Youth accomplish amazing things.

*It's hard to turn away when you see
that happening.*

- Administrator

Conclusion



With the first round of YLAT funding more than a decade ago, the team's founders had big ideas for their new partnership among young people, the Muskie School, and DHHS administrators. They scarcely imagined, however, that team members would write legislation, train the entire corps of caseworkers, influence the state's federal review, and hold seats on the most influential child welfare committees in Maine.

In defining their model and completing this white paper, YLAT hopes to share what they have learned with the field. Many other states and counties have similarly searched for ways to get the older youth in their child welfare systems involved. The YLAT approach is distinguished: in its longevity; its unique three-way partnership of youth, University, and public agency; its guiding values of youth-adult partnership; and its lengthy list of achievements.

The model and white paper also represent an optimistic, yet realistic, eye on the team's future. By more consistently and clearly defining their values, activities, and intended results, the team makes a commitment to being even stronger and more strategic going forward. They are committed to ensuring their approach fits the results they want to achieve, and to tracking whether positive outcomes are indeed occurring.

Overall, the YLAT model demonstrates that sustained partnership between youth and adults is possible. Moreover, when such a partnership is purposeful and mutually respectful, it is a powerful catalyst for change. Not only can the participating youth learn and grow, they can ignite powerful reforms. When their passionate messages reach child welfare and community leaders, systems can become more responsive to their needs. In the end, all youth in care can enjoy what every child deserves – a family, a bright future, and a chance to be part of something larger than themselves.

One of the biggest messages YLAT has accomplished is to dispel the negative image of youth in care. YLAT wanted to make things better and they have.

– Administrator

YLAT keeps siblings connected

The best way to understand YLAT is to look in greater depth at the team's initiatives. In developing this paper, selecting the first initiative to discuss as a case study was no challenge. At the center of the team's first decade of efforts – and the issue on which they have made the greatest headway – is sibling connections.

When children and youth enter placement, siblings may or may not continue to live together. While many foster families or group care facilities provide homes to keep siblings together, a variety of barriers can get in the way. Children may enter placement at separate times, homes may not have space, children can have vastly different needs making it difficult for one caregiver to support all of them, or children can sometimes present a safety concern to one another. As placement lasts longer, the chances of siblings being separated increases – as the circumstances of each brother, sister, and caregiver changes over time.

The child welfare system can offer a variety of reasons why siblings become separated, many of which are valid. But for YLAT youth, losing siblings is one of the most difficult things to accept about being in care. Losing homes and parents is hard enough, but, in the face of that, YLAT youth explained that their brothers and sisters are all the more important. The team has spearheaded three distinct campaigns to maintain sibling connections, focusing on DHHS policy, the Camp To Belong Program, and sibling rights legislation. This case study describes the activities and outcomes that were part of each.

The First Campaign: DHHS Policy

Activities: The team advises decision makers with staff support

The story of the team's efforts to maintain sibling connections starts with team members. While the Muskie staff played a role in creating the opportunity to lead, it was team members who decided that sibling connections would be a key message to the DHHS Commissioner when they were invited for the 2001 annual fireside chat.

When the Commissioner and leadership team heard firsthand the stories of loss and separation from team members who could not live with or visit their brother and sisters, they were moved to act. The team expanded their advisory role on the topic of siblings – not just waiting for the next year's fireside chat. Instead, ten team members who were most significantly invested in the siblings effort arranged to meet the child welfare director. After their meeting, the director invited the team to assist her in writing a new siblings policy.

Approximately 20 youth participated in a dozen meetings. They gathered input, reviewed feedback, and assessed the final policy. One team member gathered literature and legal references from other states, and four youth co-wrote the policy with DHHS staff.

Results: The child welfare system adopts youth-friendly sibling policy and practices

In 2002, Maine adopted its new Sibling Placement & Visitation Policy. It makes placing siblings together a priority and requires documentation with valid reasons for any separation. It promotes meaningful contact when separation must occur, including frequent and documented sibling visits. Finally, it requires that youth in care be informed whenever a brother or sister moves and that siblings be permitted to write and call one another freely.

To help move this policy into practice, YLAT youth have continued to discuss the importance of siblings in their appearances as trainers. Through caseworker and foster/adoptive parent training, they reinforce how important connections to their brothers and sisters are in their lives, and its requirement by state policy. Finally, DHHS staff have since noted that their experience working closely with YLAT youth has influenced them in drafting subsequent policies. For example, when foster care licensing standards were revised, the spirit of the sibling policy was carried over into them as well.

The Second Campaign: Launching Camp To Belong Maine

Activities: The team speaks out about how to unite siblings

The YLAT team did not end their sibling initiatives with the adoption of new policy. Around the time of its passage, a team member was watching Oprah and saw Lynn Price, the founder of Camp To Belong, appear on the show. The team member contacted Price to learn more about the Camp, which brings together sibling groups who are in separate child welfare placements for a week of summer camp each year. The team member also connected Price and YLAT Coordinator Penthea Burns. Together, they launched a statewide effort to bring Camp To Belong to Maine.

Camp To Belong Maine took two years of planning, fundraising, and outreach. YLAT members were critical members of a larger team that spoke out about the importance of the Camp, securing the necessary resources from DHHS, service agencies, and private donors. YLAT members conveyed to DHHS the importance of a resource like Camp To Belong.

Being placed in a new environment, the connection I had to my sister was the only stable thing in my life.

–Youth

Results: The child welfare system provides resources for Camp to Belong

The first camp was held in 2004 and has continued every year since, with between 50 and 60 young people and 25 to 30 adult volunteer camp counselors participating every year. DHHS actively supports Camp To Belong Maine by providing staff for planning committees, paying for camper registration fees, allowing staff to serve as volunteers without having to use vacation time and in many other ways. In this case, YLAT youth used their public speaking skills to shape how resources are distributed.

This summer has been my happily ever after, spending time with my sister.

- Youth

The Third Campaign: New laws protect siblings' rights to visit

Activities: The team influences the legislative process

Still, the team wasn't finished with its efforts to keep siblings connected. In 2002, a high school freshman wrote to the Governor's office to share her experience. She entered foster care while her siblings remained at home with her mother. She wanted to visit them, but her mother refused. The court's hands were tied, as it had no authority to order a biological parent to arrange visitation between children at home and others in placement.

The Governor found the story moving and his staff put the young woman in touch with the YLAT team, as she had not previously been a member. There, she found a community of similarly engaged young people and led them in creating the legislation needed to require sibling visitation. As a member of the team, she spoke to an audience of 250 lawyers and the DHHS Commission about being unable to see her siblings. The Commissioner promised to help her get in touch with the Attorney General. The Attorney General's Office then worked with a team of YLAT youth on the content of a visitation law, and submitted it to the state legislature.

Results: Sibling laws respond to youth needs

Following the testimony of five YLAT youth at the Maine statehouse, the Act to Support Sibling Rights in Child Welfare Custody Matters passed in 2006 by a wide margin. The law allows the courts to order parents with children in care and at home to make the children at home available for visits. It also gives youth the right to request sibling visitation. Finally, it requires DHHS to make reasonable efforts to establish agreements with prospective adoptive parents, so that they will continue visits between the child they are adopting and his or her brothers and sisters who remain in care.

Overall

Results: Benefits for YLAT members and all youth in care

For the YLAT members, participating in the sibling initiatives had many benefits. They shared stories of challenges in their lives, receiving personal and peer support. Their public speaking abilities grew, and they learned about the policy-making and legislative process. They were listened to—and saw results—from influential adults. The most involved team members wrote policy and legislation, met law-makers, and spoke before the Governor. It was a significant leadership experience, shaping the course of their young lives.

Their work benefits more than just themselves. A recent study on the results of YLAT's sibling efforts found that the vast majority of caseworkers are aware of the 2002 sibling policy, and believe that siblings are more often placed together or having visitation compared to the time before the policy passed. Nearly all caseworkers are aware of Camp To Belong Maine, and half have referred youth on their case loads to participate. All of the Assistant Attorneys General, who represent the State of Maine in child welfare court proceedings, are aware of the Sibling Rights legislation. While YLAT still aspires to directly evaluate whether more young people are connected with their siblings through placement and visitation, initial evidence suggests the team has had a positive impact on the system.

Camp To Belong Evaluation

Muskie staff began working in collaboration with Camp To Belong International (CTB Int'l) to develop and test an impact evaluation of the Camp To Belong Maine (CTBM) program.

- The Muskie staff, CTBM staff and the CTB Int'l Board of Directors created a logic model to articulate the program's components, strategies, outputs and outcomes, in the short- and long-term.
- An evaluation tool and process, founded on the logic model, was established by Muskie and CTBM staffs, utilizing the assistance of a graduate student in the process.
- The evaluation was implemented at the 2009 camp session of CTBM.
- The Muskie staff completed an analysis of the data and summarized the results in a report for the CTBM stakeholders. The report provided suggestions for how to refine the evaluation tool for future use.
- A presentation of the logic model, evaluation, and summary report was presented to the CTB Int'l Board of Directors and the CTB Member Camps, with the idea that each of the eight member camps around the nation may use the same evaluation tool, providing consistency and comparable information across sites.

YLAT advocates for permanency

Many youth in care have personally felt the devastation of being without families. The team's focus on sibling connections is just one illustration of their commitment to enhancing the ties between youth in care and their families. With their long history as partners, YLAT members, Muskie staff, and DHHS recently made a deeper, more direct commitment to deploying the team to work on permanency for young people. This second case study highlights a distinctive set of efforts recently undertaken by the team, increasing the chances that older youth in care will have a lifelong family of their own.

Youth leaders have defined permanency as a family for life and a forever home. While youth understand and value a family to which they legally belong, it has been something that youth have had trouble finding. This can make it hard to believe that lasting family relationships will occur. Youth may give up thinking about permanency and be willing to settle for stability that allows them to maintain friends, activities, and not having to start over.

Simply finding adults who will provide that permanent family connection to youth is challenging. There is a lack of community awareness of the need for families for older youth and for youth's capacity to bond with families. The public perception that does exist is fraught with misconceptions and myths that youth are damaged, leading families to think they cannot handle it.

Similarly, finding families that youth already have a connection with has been problematic. The moving around that youth experience interferes with maintaining connections. Youth have a hard time remembering extended family connections and some of this information has been lost in the system.

Finally, the focus of work with older youth in care for many years has simply been to prepare them for young adulthood. College planning, work readiness and preparing for one's first apartment took priority without significant planning for lifelong family connections.

*Permanency is
someone who
cares about you,
supports you
and loves you
unconditionally.*

– Youth

The First Campaign: The New England Permanency Initiative

Activities: Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Adolescent Permanency

When Casey Family Programs and the Massachusetts Department of Social Services sponsored a statewide Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) on Adolescent Permanency in 2005, they generously extended invitations to their neighboring states of Maine and Rhode Island to participate. The BSC model originated in health care and was adapted for use in child welfare. The model consists of a bottom-up approach to systems change: frontline workers test innovative ideas on a small scale. When their small-scale tests identify effective solutions, those can be spread throughout an organization. The BSC approach assembles “core teams” from different offices, and these teams are supported in their change efforts through a series of facilitated “learning sessions” over the course of a year. For Maine, the core team members were the YLAT director, a former youth in care and four DHHS staff members. This team participated in the BSC from the fall of 2005 to the spring of 2007.

The BSC core team began by conducting a self-assessment of the Portland, Maine DHHS District. They found that youth in care ages 11 to 18 were the least likely group to achieve permanency. The team targeted this group of youth in care, applying the BSC model to test innovative methods to achieving greater permanency. The YLAT member used the leadership and public speaking skills gained as a team member to heighten the voices of current and former youth in care at all three of the learning sessions.

Outcomes: More youth in care achieve permanency

The yearlong participation in the BSC achieved significant results for youth in care within the Portland district and for the DHHS staff who were involved in the work. Out of the 270 11- to 18- year-old youth in care at the time of the self-assessment, 45 left DHHS custody and achieved permanency with a family member or fictive kin (a non-relative who is considered to be ‘like family’ to a child). A third of the original group remained in DHHS custody, but were placed in family foster homes rather than group care. Most importantly staff within the Portland district learned that by setting goals, implementing small changes, and embracing an “I’ll try anything once” attitude, they could produce long-term, positive results for the adolescents they serve. Muskie staff, YLAT, and DHHS also experienced positive outcomes as they were able to take these lessons and bring the discussion about permanency for youth back to the rest of their state.

As an administrator, it keeps your head in line – the impact you’re having. You lose something if you don’t see that.

– Administrator

The Second Campaign: The 2008 Permanency Summit

Activities: YLAT begins the permanency discussion in Maine

Permanency was raised as an agenda item at the annual Youth Leadership Summit in the winter of 2007. YLAT members presented recommendations to policy makers at a fireside chat and one YLAT member suggested that a statewide permanency summit be held. A summit would provide an avenue for youth in care and DHHS staff to talk about permanency and delve deeper into this important issue. The policy makers listened and once again YLAT was successful in bringing attention to a critical issue in the child welfare system.

With the support of Muskie and DHHS, the first Permanency Summit was held in February of 2008; at this Summit, awareness turned into action. Each DHHS District (including Central Office) was invited to send a team comprised of up to 10 DHHS staff (caseworkers, supervisors and administrators) and 10 current or former youth in care. Prior to the Summit, participants were asked to respond to questions about permanency through an on-line survey so the team could better understand participants' definitions of permanency, the differences in their definitions, as well as how they dealt with differences. Over 160 people (85 OCFS staff and 81 current or former youth in foster care) participated in the youth/staff teams. The BSC model was introduced to participants in hopes of achieving results similar to those Portland achieved the previous year. For two days, youth and adults worked as partners in nine teams to define what permanency means, identify key barriers preventing youth in care from achieving it, and developing plans to address these barriers. The youth in care participated in the Summit as experts and were treated as equals in discussing issues that impact them directly.

At the conclusion of the Summit, each District group comprised of DHHS staff and current or former youth in care presented the results of their work together to a Listening Panel of policy makers and state leaders. The panel was comprised of Maine's First Lady, the Administration for Children, Youth and Families Liaison to Maine, Executive Director of Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine, A Family For ME, Director of the DHHS Office of Child and Family Services, Liaison from a Maine Congressman's office, Maine Attorney General, Child Protection Division Chief from the Office of the Attorney General, the President of the Guardian Ad Litem Institute, and the Family Division of the Maine District Court.

Outcomes: Permanency discussion leads to impact on policy

Summit evaluations indicated that participants gained a greater understanding of the barriers to permanency. Participants expressed great understanding about youth and increased motivation to work harder for permanency. At the Summit, adults sitting on the Listening Panel and the DHHS staff team members witnessed the value of having youth

voice present in discussions about improving the child welfare system. An equally important component of the Summit was an evening talent show, when youth and adults related to one another so that everyone enjoyed the event on a personal level, rather than as a youth in care or a staff member.

After the Summit, the DHHS Central Office formed a Permanency Team that continued meeting. The team – including YLAT members, YLAT alumni and Maine DHHS – collaborated to create a definition of permanency to guide staff across the state. A founding member of YLAT diligently conducted research on definitions of permanency in other parts of the country. She brought it to the group for what turned out to be a very difficult discussion. This discussion was a turning point for the group and taught members that deepening the dialogue about permanency is an extremely effective way to move the work forward. The definition is below:

Permanency is: A safe, committed, loving relationship that is intended to last forever between a young person and adult* where the young person receives consistent emotional support, nurturing and acceptance based on trust and respect, providing for the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of the young person and offering legal rights and social status of full family membership while assuring lifelong connections with the young person’s extended family, siblings and other significant relationships.

(*This can include birth family, extended kin, friends, foster and adoptive parents and/or other caring adults identified by the youth)

As the Central Office Permanency Team’s discussion progressed, they translated their learning into a permanency policy. They worked together as equals, with former youth in care drafting the policy. Their policy was adopted in December 2008 and would not be in place without the leadership of YLAT members and the commitment of DHHS and Muskie staff to listen to the voices of youth in care.

The Third Campaign: The 2009 Permanency Summit

Activities: Deepening the discussion statewide

The Central Office Permanency Team planned the 2009 Permanency Summit differently, incorporating feedback from the previous Summit. To increase the voice of youth at the Summit, each district formed a team. Half of the members were current and former youth in care. To sustain the work at the Summit throughout the following year, teams included members who felt able to commit to participate for a full year. To increase the diversity of perspectives, adults from the broader child welfare community – care providers, foster parents, and legal staff – as well as DHHS staff, participated. To increase the cohesiveness of teams, preparation and planning meetings occurred within each of the districts before the Summit was held.

Maine developed goals for its Youth Permanency efforts to:

1. Achieve greater permanence for youth than we did last year.
2. Achieve greater permanence for youth who have been in care for long periods of time.
3. Reduce the use of APPLA (Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) as a permanency goal.
4. Increase utilization of known permanence strategies.

The Summit provided district teams with time to look specifically at the data within their districts. Much like the BSC model, they identified the areas they would target throughout the following year. Districts met separately to strengthen the youth-adult partnerships within their area and to begin action plans they would carry out together. The summit also included large group sessions, with panel presentations from national child welfare leaders and from Maine's current and former youth in care who experienced various permanency outcomes.

Outcomes: District permanency teams carry the initiative further

The Summit in 2009 provided an opportunity not only to continue the dialogue about permanency, but deepen an intense conversation. Although this was an emotional and challenging discussion at times, it was a critical and necessary element in moving the permanency work past a superficial level. The district teams have continued to meet since the 2009 Permanency Summit and are planning regional events for April 2010. Although challenges still abound, the teams are moving forward and continuing the permanency discussion, planning, and action as the initiative continues. Once again, YLAT was a catalyst for what will be a major shift in policy and practice, with substantial impacts on the lives of foster youth across the State of Maine.

The achievements of District teams include the development of questions for staff to use with youth to explore their hopes and expectations around permanent and lifelong connections, the delivery of youth-led training of OCFS staff regarding the need for permanency for older youth in care, development of a case planning tool for youth to prepare for their Family Team Meetings, creation of a checklist for how youth can be engaged in permanency planning for themselves, development of a checklist for staff to make meetings with youth more meaningful and supportive of permanency outcomes.

They listen to us. The fact that we're together deciding on our future.

– Youth

Overall

Outcomes: Benefits for YLAT members and all youth in care

While we cannot prove that the activities of Permanency Teams have created changes, we do know of concrete changes that have occurred since the inception of this work. These changes include reducing the overall number of Maine children in care from 2,165 in January 2008 to 1,757 currently and reducing the number of youth placed in congregate care from a high of 760 to 153 currently. Maine went from 47th in the nation to 9th in the nation for achieving permanency within federal timeframes. Historically, on average about 200 youth have 'aged out' of foster care upon reaching young adulthood. Last year the number of youth who left care at the age of 18 without permanency was 35. In July 2008 there were approximately 700 youth in care aged 15-21. In October 2009, that number was around 500. During that time, the greatest reduction in numbers was with youth aged 16 and 17. These two age groups represented 67% of the total reduction of youth in care aged 15-21 from July 2008 to October 2009.

For the YLAT members, participating in the permanency initiative has been beneficial in ways similar to the benefits from the sibling initiative. Additionally, some of the YLAT members and other youth in care who have participated in the permanency initiative have developed a new understanding of family and its importance throughout the course of their lives. Youth in care or formerly in care who previously felt they did not need a family have opened their hearts to this idea and some have found families as a result of their participation in the initiative.

For DHHS, staff have a deeper understanding of permanency and how to help youth achieve it. They believe that more youth in their care have achieved permanency because of the initiative. The Maine child welfare system has seen improvements in areas where most states in the nation are struggling. While national numbers of older youth in care rise, Maine has witnessed a decrease, as more youth in care move out of the system and into lifelong families that will last.

The most notable of the challenges for the Permanency Teams is maintaining youth involvement, particularly for those youth who have not achieved permanency yet. And while these youth remain involved, how does the Permanency Team commit to being champions for permanency for each of their youth members.

As the relationship among youth team members, the Muskie School, and DHHS continues to grow and mature, they expect the permanency initiative will continue to change young people's lives.

Contributing Authors

Marie Zemler Wu is an independent consultant and researcher, focused in child welfare, social policy, and government and nonprofit strategy. She has served several times as an application reviewer and site visitor for the Ash Center's Innovations in American Government Awards program. Her first contact with the Youth Leadership Advisory Team was as their site visitor in 2008.

Marie has worked with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Strategic Consulting Group and the Center for the Study of Social Policy. With these organizations, she provided guidance to leaders of public child welfare agencies in New Jersey, New York City, and Indiana supporting their comprehensive system reforms. She developed particular expertise in the development of quality assurance processes as well as the recruitment and support of foster, adoptive, and relative caregivers. She also consulted to the District of Columbia's public child welfare agency on the topic of placement stability and attainment of legal permanency for children with long stays in foster care.

Marie holds a Master's Degree in Public Policy from the Harvard Kennedy School. She obtained her bachelor's degree from Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where she majored in psychology and communication studies.

Penthea Burns is a Policy Associate, with the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School of Public Service. Penthea has a Masters Degree in Social Work and over 30 years experience in Maine's child welfare system. She is the Director of Maine's Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT) and a Co-Founder of Camp To Belong Maine.

Penthea has co-authored publications about engaging youth as leaders:

- *Influencing Public Policy in Your State: A Guide for Youth in Care*
- *Partnering with Youth: Involving Youth in Child Welfare Training and Curriculum Development*
- *2007 CFSR ToolKit for Youth Involvement: Engaging Youth in the Child and Family Services Review*

Marty Zanghi is the Director of the Youth & Community Engagement Team at the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School of Public Service. In 1996, Marty co-founded YLAT with the state of Maine DHHS.

Marty has worked in the child welfare field for over 25 years, primarily with youth, public/private agency staff and administrators. He has provided training and technical assistance to public and private agencies, including faith-based and community-based organizations, in the areas of organizational and program planning and development. His training and technical assistance have enhanced the capacity of organizations in the areas of youth leadership development, adventure-based programming, mentoring and community engagement. He has written and presented extensively on preparing youth for successful transition to young adulthood.

Dianna Walters, a foster youth alumni who "aged out" without a family after 9 years in care, joined the Youth Leadership Advisory Team at age 16 and advocated passionately for youth in care. She was part of the New England Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Adolescent Permanency and is on the Maine DHHS Central Office Permanency Team. During her 2009 internship in Senator John Kerry's Washington DC office, Dianna co-authored the report *Using Yesterday to Shape Tomorrow: Uniting 500,000 Voices for One Mission*.

Dianna is working to establish a Maine Chapter of the Foster Care Alumni of America. She also works with homeless and at-risk adolescents in a local social service agency.

Dianna is pursuing a Master's degree in Public Policy and Management at the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School of Public Service. In her graduate assistantship, with the Cutler Institute on Health and Social Policy, she has been conducting research on best practices in transition planning for young adults. She hopes to spend her career positively impacting child welfare policy and the lives of foster youth.

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