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**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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## **A Playbook for Engaging Youth in Community-based Programming**

Informed by experience and effective practice



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## About the Playbook

### CONTEXT

Over the last six months, a cross-functional group of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago (CCAC) leaders – from our youth engagement, behavioral health, strategy, and client and community impact teams – embarked on a robust learning journey. Along the way, we engaged youth and families, community-based leaders, Catholic Sisters with social services expertise and experience, and our research partner at Notre Dame’s Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO). We set out to develop a multi-year youth engagement strategy informed by relevant literature, effective practices, lived experience, and our own experience engaging youth across six communities in Chicago and in Lake County, Illinois. This robust planning process was supported by the Catholic Sisters Initiative at the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.

Our hope is that fellow faith and community-based organizations – large and small, urban and rural – seeking to refresh or develop a youth engagement strategy can benefit from what we have learned. This playbook is a starting point. Additional information can be found in the literature review and a description of key themes from our site visits of effective-practice programs around the U.S., both developed by LEO; a community needs assessment with insights from youth, parents, community leaders, and Catholic Sisters; and our theory of change and accompanying outline of the strategy we are about to enact.

### KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS

The effective practices that we are highlighting here are both distinct and interconnected. While each program element adds value on its own, we saw in our site visits and learned through our conversations with youth that they are also mutually reinforcing activities (for example, an experiential learning series that mentors attend alongside youth is more robust). In our learning journey, we identified five practices that we would encourage incorporating into a robust youth engagement strategy. In this playbook, we also share how our team is implementing each practice. The elements are instructive – and they are broad enough to enable customization based on youth, community, and resources.

Based on all we have learned, we have landed on five effective youth engagement elements that can serve as “golden threads” through your youth engagement strategy:

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|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| Mentoring                          | Behavioral health                           | Two-generational supports |
| Experiential learning and exposure | Data-informed and evidence-based approaches |                           |

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## Mentoring

**Youth are best positioned to thrive when they are surrounded with trusted, positive adults who are committed to building authentic, caring relationships.**

Close, healthy, consistent relationships between mentors and mentees that last for a significant portion of time are key to success. Through working with a mentor, youth can expand their interests, build self-confidence, develop self-regulation skills, and start setting goals for the future. Mentoring can help youth as they go through challenging life transitions, including dealing with stressful situations at home and during periods of transition. Research demonstrates that mentoring interventions that focus on social-emotional learning competencies are the most successful in middle school.

**A robust mentoring model recognizes that teachers and learners aren't two distinct groups; rather, everyone teaches, and everyone learns.**

What can this look like in practice? At CCAC, we recruit youth starting in 5th grade and provide consistent support as they transition through middle school and enter high school. Youth will experience group mentoring, 1:1 check-ins, experiential learning, and leadership development opportunities. Through a variety of activities and experiences, we are giving young people the chance to build positive coping strategies (e.g., handling strong emotions), make good decisions, avoid peer conflict, form positive friendships, and reach their full potential. At our Peace Corner Youth Center, full-time mentors are trained in curriculum development, classroom management, group facilitation, and social justice practices.

Small groups meet twice a week, where goal setting, team building, and social awareness take center stage. Multiple evidenced-based curriculums and resources designed specifically for this age group inform the work. And yet – mentors are empowered to adapt and develop new activities to ensure the program is engaging and culturally relevant.

Different styles of learning are incorporated into each lesson, using music, art, games, physical activities, media, and other creative strategies to help youth feel successful and engaged. Establishing rituals and routines create a predictable and safe environment to help youth heal from trauma. This sense of safety allows youth to engage in self-reflection and share their feelings and ideas with the group. Celebrations and incorporating play help youth to form friendships, create lasting memories, and truly feel like they belong to a community. Ultimately, we hope this model helps youth to increase their self-esteem, heal from trauma, and develop the skills that they need to be successful adults. Each of these goals is informed by the youth and parents in our community.



## Behavioral Health

**Access to affordable behavioral health services is critical for adolescents, including as we all come through the COVID pandemic. The key is engaging youth in a way that is not stigmatizing.**

LEO's literature review provides ample evidence that diagnoses of mental and behavioral health problems (MBH) in children persist at an alarming rate. These issues disproportionately affect children and adolescents of color from low-income communities. The research continues to show that untreated and unaddressed MBH can have a negative effect on students' academic achievement, friendships and social life, completion of school, and ability to continue their education at a postsecondary level.

We have learned time and again that building trusting relationships is key to engaging youth and families in clinical and case management services. It is difficult for counseling to take hold in isolation; at the same time, youth engagement programs are experienced by our staff and community partners as insufficient without a behavioral health element. In our focus groups and interviews, youth and parents emphasized the need for additional behavioral health services in the community but expressed an unwillingness to engage with someone they do not trust.

At Catholic Charities, our youth engagement strategy integrates a clinical manager into the team. This clinician participates in mentoring activities, ensures services are trauma-informed, provide staff training and consultation, and offers onsite individual and family counseling. As a mentor, our clinical manager can form positive relationships with youth, provide education that addresses mental health issues, and promote the benefits of therapy. This relationship-based strategy – integrated into the fabric of youth programming – is intended to dispel the stigma around mental health services, making it more likely that youth and their families will successfully enroll in counseling services to address mental health issues that are hindering them from reaching their full potential.



## Two-Generational Supports

**Our strategy is designed to help youth achieve long-term success, and yet we know that interventions that only focus on one member of the family are limited in effectiveness.**

LEO's literature review concludes that behavioral health issues in youth can often be linked to unrest at home. Children dealing with challenges, such as trauma, unstable housing, or food insecurity often demonstrate poor social-emotional skills. If our goal is to build the social-emotional competence of adolescents, we must use a two-generation approach that targets the family unit and leads to significantly better outcomes for both children and parents. These approaches emphasize education, economic supports, social capital, and health and wellbeing to create a legacy of economic security that passes from one generation to the next.

While the goals can feel overwhelming, the services will feel familiar to community-based organizations. The work of implementing a two-generation supports model encourages us to first ensure we are actively engaging the parents and caregivers meaningfully and in a way that is accessible to them, and second to ensure we are building some connective tissue between the youth and adult programming (while preserving adolescents' need for autonomy and parents' need for a safe, adult space).

Through our partnership with fellow faith-based, nonprofit organization Maryville Academy, parents and caregivers can engage in parenting classes, family engagement activities, case management services at a nearby (but, importantly, not co-located) site. Parenting classes use evidence-based curriculums, like Triple P Parenting, that help parents learn and practice strategies to address behavioral and emotional challenges experienced by their children. This type of education empowers parents to tackle problems in their family, school, and community. Field trips and other family engagement activities provide unique opportunities to connect with others, explore the city, and strengthen family bonds. Families who are interested in more targeted supports can work with Maryville staff to receive case management services or enroll in services with CCAC therapists. Parents and caregivers' regular participation can help them to develop the strong, positive, trusting relationships that are critical to engaging their youth at home and in community.



## Experiential Learning and Exposure

**Experiential learning is an effective strategy to develop deeper understanding, enhance the capacity for critical thinking, and practice problem-solving abilities in complex or unclear situations.**

Our youth engagement model is designed to help youth connect with others, learn more about themselves and the world around them, and find joy and purpose during this unique period of adolescence. Through a variety of unique and (in many cases) youth-directed experiences, participants build their skill sets, build their understanding of a world of possibilities, and grow their personal network. Away from a classroom, youth identify their strengths, develop new personal and professional interests, and increase their understanding of career paths.

At CCAC, youth learn by doing. Field trips, community service projects, skill-building and career exploration camps help youth to discover new skills, set long-term goals, and feel more optimistic about their future. Activities include high ropes courses, nature hikes, and visits to our city’s landmarks and museums. These types of experiences are a huge draw for youth who rarely leave their neighborhood and come from schools and families that are not able to invest in different camps and enrichment activities.

In our focus groups, youth expressed a desire to learn more about entrepreneurship, coding, and opportunities to explore the world outside their immediate neighborhood. Our spring break and summer camps – critical, complementary components of our strategy – provide immersive experiences to participate in hands-on experiences and engage in deep learning. We see youth walk away profoundly impacted in their educational and professional goals.

Further, our leadership initiatives – including a Youth Leadership Council – helps youth to develop skills in “real time” while making change in their community. We are enthusiastic about the prospect of partnering with Catholic Sisters on these experiential learning opportunities, especially the leadership development initiative.





## Evidence-Based, Data-Informed Approaches

**A robust youth engagement strategy is built on a solid foundation of research, effective practices, and community knowledge that can be used to create lasting change for families.**

There is a solid foundation upon which to build. Our learning journey opened our eyes to the evolving research and the incredible work that youth- and family-serving organizations are doing across the country. We encourage periodic site visits to spend time with other organizations in your community, share learning and ideas, and bringing youth, parents, and caregivers together periodically – simply to listen, and no doubt to learn. Our strategy is deeply informed by the literature review, site visits, and focus groups, which together provide a clearer picture of interventions that work across the country and a deeper understanding of our clients’ preferences, needs, and values.

Moving forward, we will continue to use evidence-based curriculums in mentoring, learn from our peers, and use multiple strategies to measure our effectiveness. Assessment tools from the Casey Foundation and Search Institute, for instance, help us to collect quantitative data; continued opportunities for youth and families to provide feedback through satisfaction surveys and focus groups give us the qualitative data needed to continually evaluate our effectiveness.

### POST-SCRIPT

*CCAC is excited to partner with LEO to formally evaluate our work moving forward – both our impact and our implementation. Their feedback will allow us to lean into and replicate the elements of our model that really work and adapt our strategy, as needed, to remain effective. We look forward to sharing what we learn with our colleagues across the sector.*