

# THEORY OF CHANGE

YMCA SAN DIEGO COUNTY – YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICES

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FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®  
FOR HEALTHY LIVING  
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

YMCA Youth & Family Services aims to support and uplift under-resourced children, families, and young adults to ensure their success and wellness throughout their lifespan. Many of YFS' clients have experienced **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** which have impacted their mental and physical health, increased stress, and complicates development trajectories and outcomes in adulthood. We aim to increase protective factors, specifically resiliency, among our clients by offering a continuum of services and supports. We create interventions and programs by applying the latest in best evidence in our respective departments, honoring tried and true modalities, and working to address systemic issues that impact our clients and participants. Through a focus on **continuous quality improvement (CQI)**, self-reflection, staff wellness, policy education, and dissemination of our learnings, we simultaneously provide services as a contractor while informing the greater social services field and impacting policy at the system levels. While YFS is an exceptional service provider and advocate for change, we understand that continuous reflection and improvement are essential. Who do we want to be and how do we want to show up for our clients and teams?

**We see ourselves as both worker and change-maker. We navigate the link between practice and transformation, utilizing our expertise, collective knowledge, and resources to improve the lives of our clients, and the systems that will impact the next generation of clients. We connect with and understand what is unique about our clients as individuals. We seek new information, analyze our own data, and focus on understanding the practices, interventions, and services that impact our clients and communities. We then share that learning with policy-makers and the field at large. We are a think-tank, contracted service provider, and an advocate for change.**

**Simply put, we do the work AND we change the work.**

YFS understands that **under-resourced** and historically marginalized individuals and families have likely experienced chronic stress over long timeframes, resulting in a toxic stress response. Adverse childhood experiences also contribute to the toxic stress response, making it difficult for individuals to develop optimal **self-regulation** skills. Self-regulation skills are the foundation for lifelong functioning in all life domains such as family and peer relationships, educational and employment environments, and other complex ecosystems. Chronic stress, trauma, abuse, disconnection, and family dysfunction can cause arrested or maladaptive skills to develop in its place. Warm and responsive relationships, co-regulation, and environmental buffering are necessary for optimal self-regulation skill development. When these ingredients are missing, self-regulation cannot develop optimally. Fortunately, self-regulation has been found to be extremely responsive to

**ACEs:** potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood. Exposure to ACEs have been shown to increase chronic diseases, mental illness, and substance abuse, and can negatively impact education and economic stability in adulthood.

**Continuous Quality Improvement:** the complete process of identifying, describing, and analyzing strengths and problems and then testing, implementing, learning from, and revising solutions. It relies on an organizational and/or system culture that is proactive and supports continuous learning.

**Under-resourced:** an individual with insufficient financial, emotional, social, or community resources.

**Self-regulation:** skills that help an individual successfully manage and navigate life's predicaments using optimal cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes. Otherwise known as executive functioning skills.

intervention, much like literacy, and can be improved at any point during the lifespan, although early childhood and adolescence are the most ideal times for intervention. With this understanding, YFS prioritizes the needs of children and young adults in our service continuum while supporting families experiencing chronic stress with **co-regulation** and resources that buffer the effects of such stress. We focus our work on supporting individuals and families using interventions that:

- **Meet basic needs and remove barriers and stressors that impede success**
- **Support mental and behavioral health through clinical support, counseling, and psycho-education**
- **Optimize skill acquisition and practice opportunities to increase protective factors and positive coping skills**
- **Enhance social network development to increase social capital and positive identity formation**
- **Increase economic stability and mobility**

## THE POWER OF RELATIONALLY RESPONSIVE SERVICES

YFS' **relationally responsive service provision** includes an emphasis on warm and responsive reactions and interactions with our clients. Warm and responsive interactions with clients can calm heightened behavior and overactive neurological systems that stem from overexposure to stress, reduce stress experienced in under-resourced environments, and allow space for developing new skills. With reduced stress, clients are better able to build trust with us, deepen engagement in services, and focus on setting and achieving long-term goals. The approach includes applying the CAAVE Model, which offers Compassion, Awareness, Acceptance, Validation, and Empowerment as a means for staff to connect with clients and one another. These qualities allow our staff to become part of a client's process in developing self-regulation skills by offering a level of safety and trust. This co-regulatory approach helps clients to feel a sense of calm when interacting with our teams and in our spaces, allowing them to fully experience our service and intervention, and making room for them to explore their options within the scope of our practice. The approach also allows our staff to protect their energy, become more mindful of their interactions and interdependence, and better serve others while taking care of themselves, protecting them from burn out.

Relationally responsive service provision also acknowledges the healing power of relationships. We understand that evidence points to **social capital** as one of the most important protective factors, not only for under-resourced individuals, but for all individuals. Social capital is often the difference between thriving and diminishing wellness. Access to emotional and fiscal resources is also inherent in quality social networks. We believe that increased access to quality relationships can replace expensive programs and services and benefit clients long after our services end, so our services focus on helping clients develop skills to increase their social networks and social capital.

**Co-regulation:** Calm "space" for a client that is characterized by warm and responsive communication.

**Relationally Responsive Service Provision:** A practice rooted in the formation of safe and stable interpersonal relationships, driven by how an individual responds to their environment and/or the emotions of others. Interactional dynamics between service providers and service consumers are viewed as the foundation for the working relationship. It is a practice that understands our human need to feel physically and psychologically safe, and this informs the service provision practices.

**Social capital:** the value of social relationships that can enhance the emotional, social, and economic stability and mobility of individuals and communities. "Turning your network into your networth"  
- Jason V. Housing PD

## HOW WE DO OUR WORK:

### • We focus on our own continuing education and create a “learning lab” for our teams:

- Our teams are encouraged to pursue formal continuing education programs and are supported in doing so while working for our agency.
- We provide access and resources to up-to-date training and learning opportunities.
- We widely share new evidence, practices, and policies throughout the agency.
- We expand our teams’ interests in social work and enhance opportunities and options in other sectors.



### • We synthesize old and new knowledge:

- We rely greatly on our internal practice experience as well as tried-and-true practices and modalities.
- We augment that practice experience with new information and innovative strategies that expand our toolbox.
- We embrace the expertise and perspectives of individuals with lived experience in designing and evaluating our programs and services.



### • Steward financial resources responsibly and efficiently:

- We invest in our team’s capacity to effectively utilize funding, diversify funding through multiple channels, and effectively operate programs as efficiently as possible.
- We create new opportunities to generate revenue through philanthropy, social enterprise, and corporate partners.
- We understand that resources are scarce and we use a combination of conscientious methods to ensure the social benefit of our programs and services and realize a return on investment through our clients’ successes and achievements.



### • We invest in our internal culture to reduce turnover and burnout, and to ensure staff have what they need to show up best for our clients and participants:

- Our teams are supported with a flexible work environment to enhance their personal and professional life balance.
- We focus on equitable wages through constant assessment of living wage, benefit packages, and equitable opportunities for advancement.
- We create opportunities for staff to expand their interests and enhance their career opportunities internally and externally.
- We recognize the power of inclusive and equitable practices and diversity among our teams and work to enhance the employment experience for all team members.



- We are actively engaged in the pursuit of new practices, policies, and procedures that reduce or eliminate barriers to inclusion and enhance opportunities for historically marginalized individuals.

#### • Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) & Self-Reflection:

- We are ever-interested in the impact of our services and aren't afraid to recognize when something isn't working.
- We gather data to help us understand how and why our interventions, policies, and practices are effective or not, to be sure we are effective, useful, and efficient.
- We ask ourselves how we can be better, All. The. Time.
- Our clients are our best resources for CQI and self-reflection. Their experiences with our programs are the glue that holds our work together. We cannot increase our impact without their voices and expertise.

#### • Direct support to individuals & families:

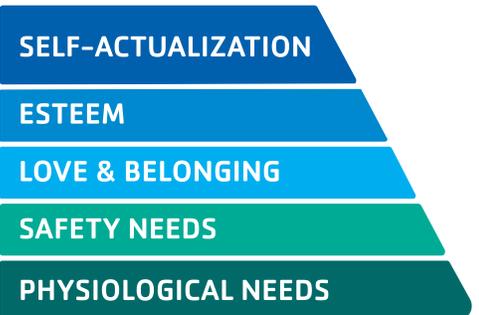
- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** helps lay the foundation for the supports and services we provide.
- Clients must be supported to remove or reduce stressful barriers and lack of resources before they can move "up the rungs" toward healthy and thriving lives.
- We remove barriers for all clients, in a variety of ways, while simultaneously assisting with skill development and achievement of meaningful goals.
- We support individuals and families during the most trying times in their lives, reinforcing their strengths while they increase protective factors and practice new coping skills.

#### • Employees with lived experience:

- We focus on hiring and supporting professional development for folks with life experiences that mirror those of our clients and participants.
- These employees' contributions greatly enhance the CQI process, act as a check and balance to our assumptions, and increase engagement with and among clients and participants.
- Clients report feeling a deeper sense of connection with a staff member who shares their experience and mirrors their life circumstances. This allows for more engagement with the client and ultimately, better outcomes through greater involvement in services.
- The value of employees with lived experience cannot be overstated, and YFS hopes to create and expand leadership opportunities among these employees in recognition of their importance.

#### • Thought leadership through dissemination:

- Our CQI and evaluation activities are aimed at providing information and



**Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** Motivational psychological theory that identifies the most important human needs. Needs at the bottom of the hierarchy must be met before individuals can attend to needs at the top.

learning to other providers, policy-makers, and key stakeholders.

- We share the good and the bad of our work to help inform the field through original research, translational research, white papers, articles, conference presentations, social media, and blog posts.

#### • **Community Activation & Partnerships:**

- We understand the power of collective impact and are committed to working alongside our partners in the communities we serve.
- We work diligently to create and maintain productive relationships with other experts, providers, policy-makers, and key stakeholders to advance our collective impact and learning. We maintain relationships with service providers in all sectors and learn from their work as they practice similar CQI activities.
- We contract and sub-contract with and for our partners to provide the highest quality services to our clients and recognize our areas of expertise. Simply put, we don't chase money or acquire contracts unless we're the best suited to perform the work, and we support our partners who are better suited, where appropriate.

#### • **Policy influence:**

- We participate at all levels of policy discussion; federal, state, and local levels are important to us.
- We advocate for improved systems responses to critical social issues using our expertise and evidence of impact.
- We share our knowledge with others to improve practice and influence policy to ensure that systems keep up with fast changing landscapes.
- We are active members of national and state advocacy coalitions, providing support to strengthen our collective impact through policy change.

#### **MORE ON THE "HOW"**

YFS incorporates **neuro-informed practice** to ensure that our expectations, services, and supports are rooted in developmental and biological awareness. To best serve under-resourced individuals and families, we must understand the physiological impact of chronic stress, poverty, trauma, and disconnection. These experiences directly influence our cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes and responses. Our staff must be well-informed and anticipate how these experiences may shape our clients' responses, behaviors, and needs. In order to best meet their needs and wants, our teams will be well-versed in brain science evidence that shape our interventions, interactions, and service approach through ongoing training and continuous learning opportunities.

YFS is present in multiple sectors across social issue areas. We are active in child welfare systems, housing and basic needs services, education and employment interventions, mental health and behavioral support, and family support and preservation services. We serve child-welfare-involved youth and families, families experiencing mental and behavioral health crises, provide critical clinical support for trauma victims, clinical support for those experiencing suffering, young adults experiencing housing and basic



#### **Neuro-informed practice:**

Since we work with clients to help change their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, it stands to reason that we should concern ourselves with brain structure and function. We need to know how the brain develops, what it does, what gets in the way of its ability to function optimally, and how to help it operate in the best way possible because, just like other organs, such as the heart or lungs, the brain can get sick. (Rutledge, 2014)

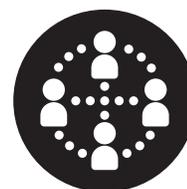
needs instability, and individuals experiencing disconnection and fractured social networks. We utilize various evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions and clinical modalities including systems therapy, family-centered practice, attachment theory, cognitive and dialectical behavior therapy, motivational interviewing, trauma-informed care, positive youth development, healing centered engagement, post-traumatic growth, resiliency-focused and strengths-based work, restorative practices, and harm reduction.

Collaboration with clients informs our service provision on a regular basis. Our CQI activities incorporate the voices of current and former clients to ensure that our approach is effective, impactful, and responsive to their needs. Their expertise contributes to changes in service delivery and to the development of new interventions and supports that better meet their needs. Additionally, YFS is committed to hiring individuals with shared life experience to guarantee that experts are responsible for quality service provision. Professionals with shared life experience are more likely to serve others in a relationally responsive way, understand the impact of the social issue at hand, and connect in a way that others may not. YFS supports individuals with shared life experience through specific professional development opportunities, when necessary.

## FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

**YFS' infrastructure, organizational practices, and activities are part of a larger strategy to ensure sustainability. Sustainability for YFS includes focused work in the following domains:**

- **Leadership & Community:** Alignment and integration within key systems of care that impact and support our clientele. Dissemination of outcomes, impact, and scholarship to stakeholders and influencers including like agencies, policy-makers, legislators, and community leaders. We ensure that our expertise and impact are clear to others to garner community and political support while influencing change within systems of care.
- **Program:** Programs and services are developed and operate through a clearly defined and articulated Theory of Change. Services are informed by best practice and best evidence, modified accordingly and continuously assessed for improvement and areas of knowledge sharing. Data management and quality assurance are important to our programs to ensure an understanding of impact and outcomes, as well as easy analysis and interpretation for knowledge sharing and continuous quality improvement activities.
- **Organizational Capacity:** Appropriate organizational infrastructure is in place to support the diverse needs of our clients, staff, funders, and strategic initiatives. Staffing and leadership activities must be supported through appropriate resource acquisition and activities of staff should be streamlined, evidence-informed, and reasonable to promote quality staff experience and work-life balance.
- **Fiscal:** Maintain appropriate fiscal support to sustain critical services and supports in key social issue areas. Diversify funding as greatly as possible, while influencing the direction of funding where possible. All team members should understand funding sources, YFS' alignment, and be engaged in practices that ensure the maintenance of vital funding sources.



## WHAT WILL WE DO IN THE SHORT TERM TO MOVE THIS CHANGE FORWARD?

Strategically engage in relationship-building activities to build our reputation, influence policy, and increase productive partnerships. We will deepen our current relationships locally with Child Welfare Services and Behavioral Health Services while broadening our scope to include relationships with state and federal agencies, such as Mental Health Services Act, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Administration for Children and Families.

- 1) Identify key relationships and circles of influence and discover participation opportunities.
- 2) Consistently assess and understand how changing policy impacts and influences our work.
  - a. Implement action plans when policy changes that protects our work and clients.
- 3) Embrace opportunities to do the work AND change the work.
- 4) Use diverse dissemination opportunities to demonstrate our expertise and scholarship.
- 5) Foster a culture of lifelong learning by empowering staff with data and CQI, access to information and training to develop and utilize their expertise.
- 6) Champion agency-wide adoption and understanding of YFS Theory of Change.
- 7) Create department-level objectives and share policy platform with staff more often.
- 8) Commit to quality assurance, strong data collection and analysis, and increasing our capacity to accomplish related goals.
- 9) Utilize and integrate evidence to increase quality and efficiency.
- 10) Build organizational capacity to support all work needed to carry out YFS' goals and objectives.
- 11) Invest in tools that support staff in increasing confidence and capacity to become subject-matter experts in their areas of work.
- 12) Maintain connection between Theory of Change and "big E" and "little e" evidence.
- 13) Conduct activities to ensure stable funding with administrative support. Dissemination activities are among priority activities.



**"Big E" evidence:** Evidence gathered through traditional research methods based on the scientific method, is generalizable, and reveals cause-effect connections.

**"Little e" evidence:** typically local or organizational level evidence based on less rigorous methods of evaluation. Anecdotal, experiential, and qualitative methods of CQI can be considered "little e."

## APPENDICES

<https://www.childtrends.org/programs-for-youth-and-young-adults-science-informed-definitions>

### ACES LINKS

[https://www.chcs.org/media/TA-Tool-Screening-for-ACEs-and-Trauma\\_020619.pdf](https://www.chcs.org/media/TA-Tool-Screening-for-ACEs-and-Trauma_020619.pdf)

#### **How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime- Nadine Burke Harris**

[https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine\\_burke\\_harris\\_how\\_childhood\\_trauma\\_affects\\_health\\_across\\_a\\_lifetime?utm\\_campaign=tedspread&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=tedcomshare](https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime?utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare)

### NEURO LINKS + SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LINKS

[https://www.bcsb.ca.gov/hcfc/documents/white\\_papers/ca\\_coalition\\_for\\_youth.pdf](https://www.bcsb.ca.gov/hcfc/documents/white_papers/ca_coalition_for_youth.pdf)

<http://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Sept.-14-2016-Congressional-Briefing-on-SEL-and-Employability-Skills.pdf>

#### **Dr. Bruce Perry- Early Childhood Brain Development**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXdBFFph2QQ&feature=youtu.be>

#### **Dr. Bruce Perry- Born for Love: Why Empathy is Endangered and Essential**

<https://youtu.be/M6kDeBaJi0M>

### DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

<https://frameworksinstitute.org/developmental-relationships.html>

[https://www.search-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Developmental-Relationships-Framework\\_English.pdf](https://www.search-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Developmental-Relationships-Framework_English.pdf)

### SOCIAL CAPITAL ARTICLES

#### **POPULATION SPECIFIC RESOURCES?**

##### **· i.e. Youth experiencing homelessness, PIT count, Chapin Hall, NN4Y, etc**

<https://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/missed-opportunities-counting-youth-experiencing-homelessness-in-america/>

<https://youthtoday.org/2019/10/federal-government-must-address-youth-homelessness-as-public-health-problem-chapin-hall/>

##### **· Grandparents raising grandchildren**

[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN\\_ID3445431\\_code996191.pdf?abstractid=3437849&mirid=1&type=2](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID3445431_code996191.pdf?abstractid=3437849&mirid=1&type=2)

##### **· Child welfare involved youth and families**

<http://frameworksinstitute.org/transition-age-foster-youth.html>

##### **· Children's mental health**

#### **Family functioning/family stability**

#### **DBT and other modalities Healing Centered Engagement**

<https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>

### **Harm Reduction**

[https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/harmreductionFS\\_Apr10.pdf](https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/harmreductionFS_Apr10.pdf)

### **DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION ARTICLES**

#### **The Elephant is not Pink**

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251411352\\_The\\_Elephant\\_Is\\_Not\\_Pink\\_Talking\\_About\\_White\\_Black\\_and\\_Brown\\_to\\_Achieve\\_Excellence\\_in\\_Clinical\\_Practice](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251411352_The_Elephant_Is_Not_Pink_Talking_About_White_Black_and_Brown_to_Achieve_Excellence_in_Clinical_Practice)

**TOWARDS A CULTURALLY COMPETENT SYSTEM OF CARE, the first ever study to explore the concept of cultural competence:** <https://spu.edu/~media/academics/school-of-education/Cultural%20Diversity/%20Towards%20a%20Culturally%20Competent%20System%20of%20Care%20Abridged.ashx>

### **TRAUMA BOOKS:**

Perry, B. D., & Szalavitz, M. (2017). *The boy who was raised as a dog: And other stories from a child psychiatrist's notebook* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Rothschild, B. (2000). *The body remembers: The psychophysiology of trauma and trauma treatment*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, NY: Penguin Books

### **OUR MISSION:**

The YMCA of San Diego County is dedicated to improving the quality of human life and to helping all people realize their fullest potential as children of God through the development of the spirit, mind and body.