



What is Harm Reduction for Youth?

A harm reduction program should empower youth by offering a support system that allows youth enough control to make their own positive decisions and then space to safely see the outcomes of these decisions. Youth is a key developmental window for the formation of an individual's skills, competencies and identity. For the highest risk youth to gain this footing, a safe space with a low-barrier for entry is necessary, but youth also need access to adults they can trust and services that can help them break the cycle of street-involvement. Harm reduction for youth means meeting a youth where they are in life and letting them make decisions about the program they are in and their own futures.

Why is a Harm Reduction Approach Necessary?

Harm reduction can be very effective for helping youth who are the hardest to reach and have the greatest need. "If we only offered a zero-tolerance approach or attempt to restrict entry for those who were currently using illicit substances, then almost all of the kids we have helped over the years would have been screened out. Our program targets youth with the greatest needs and the riskiest lifestyles. If they could have just gotten off the street and clean on their own, then they wouldn't be where they are now, which is in need of a program willing to meet them on their own terms," said Heather Brown of Outside In.

Two and a half years ago, the Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska was a zero tolerance program: if youth were using, they were kicked out of the program and services. "Our success rates were low, below 50%. We realized we were seeing the same youth cycle in and out until they were too old for youth services. We weren't helping youth with the greatest needs. So we made a shift to a harm reduction, trauma-informed model. Now our success rates are up to 75%" said Vicki Lawton. "The shift from zero tolerance was hard, but it was absolutely worth it. Helping just one youth who wouldn't have been helped before has an incalculable moral benefit, but the benefit to the taxpayer is calculable: many youth who develop a history of homelessness at a young age never break the cycle and become adults who are chronically homeless and incur high costs to public systems."

In Portland, Maine, Preble Street Youth Services evaluated the population they are serving and found that the youth in their programs have histories of trauma, mental illness, and substance abuse. Ninety-four percent of youth in the study had mental health issues. Nearly one-hundred percent were using illicit substances. Nearly half had considered or attempted suicide. Eighty-two percent of females and thirty-eight percent of males had experienced domestic violence. "Using a trauma-informed approach, it becomes clear to our staff that for many youth, substance abuse and some other risky behaviors can be mechanisms to cope with past trauma, but these behaviors can also create new trauma. At Preble Street Youth Services, we have found that to help break this cycle we first need to get youth in the door. To do that we offer whatever it is a youth needs at the moment. Usually this is food, but it can also be clothing or a bed.

Once we get them in the door, they end up using more services than they initially said they were interested in, and the more services they use the better chance they have of having a positive outcome."

Five ways to build a successful harm reduction program

1. Build Trust.

All three programs we spoke with said that building trust was a critical first step to connecting youth to the services that would help them gain stability. To do this they recommend building an intake and review process that allows youth to express what they want and then act on what they ask for. Allow the youth to have a say in how the program is built.

2. Train Your Staff on Harm Reduction and Trauma Informed Care.

Vicki Lawton had to retrain her staff when the Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska shifted to a harm reduction model four years ago. "It was a difficult shift because it required a fundamental culture change for our staff. A zero tolerance policy gives staff a sense of power over the youth: 'If you don't walk the line, you're out of here!' But



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that isn't a way to build relationships and trust. And that is what these youth need more than anything, trust. The two main objections I had from the staff as we went through this switch were: 1. If we let them come as they are and don't eject them for abusing substances, then they won't know what the real world is like; and 2. The youth will end up setting the program goals and standards. The real world is not based on a one strike and you're out system. You certainly can get arrested, fired, or kicked out of housing for uncontrolled substance abuse, but many people use for years without losing their jobs or houses. Instead of just declaring that substance abuse is always bad because we say it is, it is better to work with the youth to help them see for themselves the negative ways substance abuse affects their lives and future. The second point of objection is very much true in a sense, but it isn't in my opinion a negative aspect of a program. Having a harm reduction approach doesn't mean you lose control, but it does mean that you tailor your program to match the youth instead of forcing the youth to fit your one-size-fits-all program. When you think about it this way, it is obvious that youth will stay engaged longer when they have a say in the programming, when they have a say in the direction of their lives."

3. Involve Youth.

Involving youth in your program is important to building trust, but it also ensures that your program will work effectively for other youth. All the programs we interviewed allow youth to tailor their own service plan to meet their needs, but they also allow them to give feedback to adapt the services offered to better meet the needs of future youth. At Preble Street and Outside In, the youth are also involved in the interview process for hiring new staff, which empowers youth and gives new staff a deeper understanding of the program before they come on board. All three programs also make an effort to hire youth who have been through their programs.

4. Use Outreach to Meet Youth where They are in the Community and Make a Positive Initial Connection.

What your outreach looks like will depend on your community, but a few basic principles are followed by all three of these programs. First, go to the places where youth experiencing homelessness are likely to hang out: parks and campgrounds, free outdoor festivals, and 24-hour stores.

Second, offer them what they are looking for: Preble Street gives out water bottles and hats or sunscreen depending on the time of year and Outside In offers free medical care through their outreach clinics. Third, offer a low-barrier place to stay when they have none and need one: Community Action Partnership has a relationship with all of the 24-hour stores in the 11 rural counties in their region and a store owner will call them instead of the police if youth are loitering. All of these approaches create a positive first contact with youth experiencing homelessness instead of punishing youth for being in their situation. This type of contact lets youth know that organizations are safe and increases the likelihood youth will seek help.

5. Build Partnerships with Other Organizations in your Community to Fill Any Holes in your Service Network.

Since youth need a wide range of services (different types of housing, health care, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, high school and college education opportunities, employment training, and access to employment opportunities, food, clothing, legal guidance, help with benefit enrollment, etc), it is important to forge partnerships with the other organizations that can provide these services. The programs we spoke with act as an intermediary for many other services at community colleges, hospitals, and other homeless shelters in their communities by making the connections between their programs and those at other facilities as seamless as possible.

Harm reduction, meeting a youth on his or her own terms and offering a safe space for a youth to access service, can help youth experiencing homelessness and engaging in risky behaviors find stability and direction. All three programs stressed the urgency of need when working with youth. "When it comes to helping youth we don't have time to lose, but when we work with our youth in partnership, it is amazing the things our young people can and do accomplish," said Jon Bradley.

Source: Ho, J. (n.d). Harm Reduction for Youth. Retrieved from www.usich.gov/population/youth/harm_reduction_for_youth