



# Serving Expectant and Parenting Youth Involved with Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems

## Overview of the Pregnancy Assistance Fund

Finding ways to address the diverse needs of expectant and parenting youth and their families (EPY) to improve their health, education, and well-being is a long-standing priority of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The HHS Office of Population Affairs (OPA) funded the Pregnancy Assistance Fund (PAF) grant program from 2010 to 2020. The PAF program supported states and tribes to provide a wide range of services in settings such as high schools, community service centers, and/or institutions of higher education.

PAF services focused on five areas: (1) personal health (e.g., case management, prenatal care, health insurance enrollment support, behavioral health, violence prevention); (2) child health (e.g., home visiting, nutrition, access to healthcare, well-child visits); (3) education and employment (e.g., tutoring, academic support, assistance with college applications, employment and job-readiness training); (4) concrete supports (e.g., food, housing, transportation, baby supplies including diapers, cribs, car seats, etc.); and (5) parenting supports (e.g., parenting and healthy relationship education, child development education, child care). PAF grantees determined which areas to focus on to improve outcomes for EPY in the areas of health, parenting, education, and economic stability.



## About the Study

HHS/OPA contracted Abt Associates to identify successful strategies and lessons learned from the Pregnancy Assistance Fund grant program (see <https://opa.hhs.gov/research-evaluation/pregnancy-assistance-fund-paf-program-evaluations/evaluation-key-strategies>). The study produced six topical briefs and corresponding in-depth case studies. The six topics were identified from a review of grantee documents and input from OPA staff. They reflect the range of approaches PAF grantees took to best serve EPY needs. The topics are (1) serving system-involved (justice or child welfare) youth; (2) serving youth in Tribal communities; (3) serving youth in rural communities; (4) cross-sector partnerships; (5) policy and systems-level strategies; and (6) strategies for improving educational outcomes. For each topic, the study selected grantees from the pool of 26 grantees funded in the most recent cohort (2018-2020) and in at least one other cohort.

The briefs and case studies draw from review of grantee documents, performance data, and semi-structured phone interviews with grantee and grantee partner staff.

## Focus of this Brief

This brief focuses specifically on the implementation experiences of three PAF grantees serving youth who had been involved with the child welfare system, the juvenile justice system, or both.<sup>1,a</sup>

Youth can be involved in these systems in a variety of ways. EPY involved in the juvenile justice system could be living in a detention center, another correctional facility, or a group home; they may also be on probation but living at home with their parents. EPY involved in the child welfare system may be in or aging out of foster care themselves or their child may be in or at risk of being placed in foster care. The nature of this system involvement and the overlapping needs of system-involved youth present a unique context for serving EPY. Young people currently in or aging out of the child welfare system, just as those involved in the juvenile justice system, often have experienced maltreatment or trauma.<sup>2</sup> Such experiences put them at greater risk of negative educational, employment, and behavioral outcomes. System-involved youth tend to have higher rates of teen pregnancy and births, and they often face greater barriers to accessing health services, finding housing, and completing their education.<sup>3,4</sup>

### Key Findings:

- Past trauma or negative experiences and dealing with multiple stressors beyond their parenting needs make system-involved EPY particularly challenging to serve. A lack of systematic, widespread services tailored to this population, particularly inside the systems themselves, complicates that challenge.
- The PAF grant program provided a unique opportunity to specifically address the parenting needs of system-involved EPY.
- Grantees took a positive youth development, strengths-based approach to serving system-involved EPY. They relied on partnerships and on staff with similar lived experience and strong community connections. Individualized case management and parenting curricula tailored to this population let grantees meet the needs of system-involved EPY in a way that appropriately reflected their circumstances.

## Three Grantees Serving System-Involved EPY

For the three grantees highlighted in this brief, the flexibility of the PAF program was powerful in letting them fill critical gaps in services to system-involved EPY. Each grantee recognized the challenges facing these particularly vulnerable youth and sought to reach them in its own way:

- The **Michigan Department of Health and Human Services** and its partners worked to serve EPY within juvenile justice and child welfare systems in multiple communities across the state. They also focused on the juvenile justice system in one community.
- The **Pennsylvania Department of Health** connected with EPY in the child welfare system specifically through one implementation partner.
- The **Oklahoma Department of Health** focused on the juvenile justice system at the state level, through a partnership with a statewide provider serving EPY.



















### Grantees serving system-involved EPY capitalized on the PAF program's:

- flexibility to identify and fill gaps;
- emphasis on family engagement;
- ability to complement and expand partner capacity; and
- ability to embed parent-focused services within youths' current environments.

The approaches and strategies the three grantees used varied somewhat, but they all relied on strategic partnerships for access to system-involved EPY and on case management to establish relationships with youth and connect them to resources.

<sup>a</sup> Although the specific experiences of youth in the child welfare system likely differ from those of youth in the juvenile justice system, there are commonalities to being system-involved, and some youth have had involvement in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

## Profiles of Three Grantees Serving System-Involved Expectant and Parenting Youth and Their Families

MICHIGAN	PENNSYLVANIA	OKLAHOMA
<b>Grantee</b> (state agency)	<b>Grantee</b> (state agency)	<b>Grantee</b> (state agency)
 Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)	 Department of Health, in partnership with Health Promotion Council	 Department of Health
<b>PAF Grant Periods</b> (fiscal year)	<b>PAF Grant Periods</b> (fiscal year)	<b>PAF Grant Periods</b> (fiscal year)
 2013-2016, 2017-2018, 2018-2020	 2017-2018, 2018-2020	 2017-2018, 2018-2020
<b>Total Youth Served</b> (annual)	<b>Total Youth Served</b> (annual)	<b>Total Youth Served</b> (annual)
 <b>193</b>	 <b>194</b>	 <b>124</b>
<b>Service Areas</b>	<b>Service Areas</b>	<b>Service Areas</b>
 Six primarily urban counties	 Philadelphia metropolitan area	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Primarily Oklahoma City and Tulsa metropolitan areas</li> <li>Expanded to other parts of the state through Office of Juvenile Affairs partnerships</li> </ul>
<b>Key Partners</b>	<b>Key Partners</b>	<b>Key Partners</b>
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 county health department</li> <li>1 public school system</li> <li>2 regional education service agencies</li> <li>1 regional family services agency</li> <li>1 direct service provider and curriculum developer</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 charter school</li> <li>1 community college</li> <li>2 community service centers</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Office of Juvenile Affairs, partnering with ~25 local youth service agencies</li> <li>2 county health departments</li> <li>1 public school system</li> </ul>
<b>Primary Approach(es)</b>	<b>Primary Approach(es)</b>	<b>Primary Approach(es)</b>
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengths-based case management</li> <li>Community-specific supplementary services</li> <li>Evidence-informed curriculum (<i>Son to a Father</i>)</li> </ul>	 Case resource navigation	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Case management</li> <li>Evidence-based curricula (<i>Love Notes; Nurturing Parenting</i>)</li> <li>Concrete supports</li> </ul>

### Key Challenges for Serving EPY Involved with Systems

Grantees identified several challenges they encountered in serving this population, providing insights into individual and system characteristics that grantees had to address to successfully deliver services.

#### Past experiences of system-involved youth present unique challenges to providing supportive services

Many EPY served by these grantees have experienced adverse childhood experiences or other negative past experiences that cause them to distrust programs and adults offering support. As these youth are learning how to be parents, they begin to reflect on their own childhoods and past events. In turn, they think about what they want for their own children. Project staff noted that youth often have complicated relationships with their own parents and negative beliefs or attitudes about parenting from past experiences. This can affect their own parenting choices and behaviors.

The PAF projects were crucial in providing these young parents with the tools to reflect on how their lived experiences can affect their relationships with their children. One grantee explained that, although reflection can be emotionally difficult for young parents, it pushes them to reconcile their own experiences and emotions. It also causes them to think critically about their role as a parent and the importance and power of that role:

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*When you're looking at educating them on being a better parent, or even being a parent, they're able to reflect on some of the things that happened in their childhood...that they didn't like. And so they want to be able to change, and this program has allowed them an opportunity to do that, not only a voice to be able to do it, to be able to talk about something that has occurred in their lives that they don't want to occur in their children's lives. They want to be good parents, and even at the age of 15, 16, they're showing us what it is for them to be a good parent to their kids. So the program has allowed them to learn about not only being a good parent, but themselves, and how to nurture, because some of them have said that they have never had positive reinforcements. —Grantee*

### **System-involved EPY often are dealing with multiple stressors that require their immediate time and energy, making it harder for them to prioritize program goals**

This population often has multiple physical and psychological needs. This creates a tension between meeting immediate basic needs, such as housing or safety, rather than addressing other important areas such as mental health or parenting needs. For example, youth aging out of foster care are less able to focus on their parenting needs when they do not have a stable place to live. Ensuring that their basic and more urgent needs are met often becomes the highest priority for them and for staff. Managing multiple stressors at once without immediate support networks (such as family members to help with childcare) also presents mental health risks that can affect the ability of EPY to connect and engage in services.

If youth are focused primarily on their housing and other basic needs when they enter a program, they might not be motivated to engage in parenting-related services even once those primary needs are met. They might even disengage with services altogether, even though parenting related needs can become more, rather than less pressing once stable housing is secured, or other basic needs are met.

### **Meeting the needs of system-involved EPY often falls outside the direct purview of the systems themselves**

Grantees discussed how the juvenile justice and child welfare systems do not lend themselves to supporting young families and how the juvenile justice system, in particular, can have punitive aspects for youth. Grantees noted this punitive approach can reinforce the sense of low self-worth that some system-involved youth already feel. The punitive aspects can be detrimental to rehabilitating these young people and create barriers to their becoming supportive parents.

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*To my knowledge, no one was working with this population for the parenting and pregnant piece of it, or at least not giving them the specialized [parenting] knowledge that they need. —Grantee*

These systems often do not prioritize the needs of EPY as parents or help develop their parenting skills. Grantees reported pockets of parenting-focused services for expectant and parenting young women generally; but no consistent model or evidence-based curriculum was being implemented in the juvenile justice or child welfare systems – specifically for high-risk out-of-home youth. States did not address the parenting needs of the system-involved EPY population in any systematic way. This was particularly the case for young fathers. Typically, fathers involved in the juvenile justice system are rarely recognized for their strengths and how they can contribute to the well-being of their families.

While they are in juvenile justice facilities, these youth often have limited contact with their families. Thus, they have limited

opportunities to practice being parents and co-parents. This can be especially true when youth are moved to different facilities, making it difficult to coordinate visits and maintain family relationships. Often facilities provide no space that is conducive to family visits. Similarly, it can be challenging to find space to deliver PAF curricula or for case managers and their clients to have private, confidential conversations.

## Approaches and Strategies to Serving EPY Involved with Systems

Grantees addressed these challenges using a variety of approaches and strategies to serve system-involved EPY. Central to all three was a strengths-based approach that relied on highly skilled trained staff, flexible case management, and a recognition of the role of trauma in these youths' lives. Partnerships across communities and/or systems helped reduce barriers to accessing services and engaging families, and parenting curricula addressed an often-overlooked need.

### **A positive youth development approach provides a foundation for creating a supportive environment that counteracts some of the negative circumstances and experiences of EPY**

Positive youth development and person-centered approaches were key in supporting system-involved EPY. Many of these youth experienced challenges in their personal lives as a result of their system involvement. Thus, the PAF projects carefully navigated interactions with them through project staff who were highly skilled at developing relationships. These relationships and project supports helped youth overcome some of their own negative perceptions or negative self-images.

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*They need to be able to have a strength-based lens that is basically pulling out some of the positives about them and have them have a sense of hope and purpose versus this blaming culture that we know is not effective in rehabilitating anybody that is in the prison system or jail system or the juvenile justice system.” —Grantee*

### **Positive Youth Development**

*YD<sup>5</sup> is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, uses, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people. This it does by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships and furnishing the support needed to build on youths' leadership strengths.” —Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs*

This strengths-based, person-centered approach in turn helped youth better understand the importance of their own actions for themselves and for their larger communities. Project staff worked with youth to instill confidence in their ability to improve their lives and become better parents. This was done by creating for EPY a sense of safety and well-being, laying the foundation for them to be more receptive and actively engaged in working to support themselves and their families.

*I think with the support that we give them, just helping them to see that... we're in this with them in a sense... trying to provide a safe space for them to be able to get their needs met, because again, a lot of them don't have that nor do they come from that at all. But, also letting them know, like, "you are also a part of the process and it's, like, person centered... we're going to help you, but we also want you to know that you have the power and the ability to help yourself, with being that supportive team alongside you. —Key Partner*

### **Strategic partnerships facilitate change within systems to support youth and promote the health and well-being of EPY**

All three of the grantees formed strategic partnerships to reach this population; however, the target system(s) and geographic scope varied by grantee. These intentional partnerships provided a way for grantees to connect with and provide services to system-involved EPY. For example, one of these three grantees added a partner to implement an evidence-informed curriculum designed for incarcerated Black fathers in one community. This complemented the work being done in other counties in the state to serve youth with current or previous juvenile justice or child welfare system involvement, through case management services and community-specific supplementary supports.

Another grantee partnered with an organization to provide housing and comprehensive social support to youth aging out of foster care or experiencing housing instability, or both. Through this partnership, PAF project staff were able to connect youth to a range of services and supports beyond housing, and to coordinate these services in a more integrated, comprehensive way. The third grantee broadened its reach by partnering with the state Office of Juvenile Affairs, which helped integrate the PAF project into many juvenile detention facilities and agencies across the state.

Strategic partnerships were crucial to embedding the programs within the existing systems in the respective communities. This integration allowed for a more informed, responsive approach to working with EPY. For example, across the grantees, youth might have been referred to the program by judges, probation officers, or case workers; in some cases, youth might have been mandated to the program by the court. Established agency or individual connections to community partners facilitated referrals and provided support both to meet requirements and to address other social and interpersonal needs that might otherwise go unaddressed within the system.

Through these partnerships, grantees worked to make changes within systems and promote positive parenting in various other ways:

- Creating more family-friendly spaces within detention facilities where youth can visit with their children, practice parenting behaviors, and experience the feeling of parenting;
- Using technology within facilities for youth to interact with their children through video chat; and
- Working directly with child welfare system case managers to coordinate services so that youth and family needs are more immediately identified and addressed.

### **Case management provides both structure and flexibility to appropriately meet the needs of system-involved EPY**

All three of the grantees offered variations of a case management model, tailored to the needs of system-involved EPY. Case management services included assessment, linkages to services, and referrals/assistance in locating and obtaining services. Case management focused on a range of skills and needs, such as parenting/co-parenting and life skills education, reproductive and personal health care, child health, behavioral health, housing, relationships, and job readiness. Grantees incorporated case management in the following ways:

- Individualized case management with supplemental services (i.e., health and nutrition workshops, group classes) that reflected sub-awardee and community needs; and
- Less intensive case management, referred to as “case resource navigation.” In the context of the child welfare system, case navigators embedded within partner sites worked closely with existing case managers to help youth navigate the resources in their community. Case resource navigation translated the many requirements of the child welfare system and eligibility for other supports in a way that youth could understand.

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*To sort of be a translator, not necessarily of language but of criteria, eligibility requirements, of what expected wait time will be, and why you should stick the course, or stay the course in order to get what you need to get. But also...if you think about it in context of someone who's a young parent who may not necessarily understand the language, and so, you sit with them, and you're, like, "This is what you need to get." If we break it down, they're like, "Oh, I didn't understand that. Now I understand it." —Grantee*

Case management allowed for targeted and individualized services as well as the development of trusting relationships with a caring adult offering consistency and non-judgmental support. The individualized nature of case management lends itself to tailoring services based on the specific circumstances and needs. This becomes especially important when supporting system involved EPY. Although case managers likely provided similar types of services to all youth across their caseloads, they could adapt these to emphasize certain issues or topics salient for system-involved youth.

The case management model also provided a framework conducive to building rapport and trust with youth. For system-involved EPY in particular, it was critical for staff to provide a safe space in which youth could feel comfortable and would trust and engage with staff. System-involved youth who have experienced difficult events in their lives can be more hesitant to trust and build relationships with new adults. Many of these youth have not had trustworthy, consistent adults in their lives in the past. Case managers within these grantee projects provided consistent and predictable support so that youth could learn they could rely on them. It was also important for staff to be honest and non-judgmental in their interactions with youth, especially for this population, who likely felt stigmatized. This trauma-informed approach to case management helped to enhance the strengths and abilities of EPY.

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*I think in general it's obviously about building rapport, but follow-through is huge. Going to a court date with somebody is going to gain you a ton of trust and rapport building. So I think we just have to let them know that we're going to show up, and we're going to follow through. Being honest and obviously non-judgmental. There's a lot that they're going through. Don't bring that down. We build up from that. —Key Partner*

### **Staff with lived experience and connections in the community are critical in supporting youth as they overcome barriers**

Grantees noted that, generally, it is beneficial to have staff with experiences like the youths' so they better understand the types of barriers and adversity that youth can face. For young men in particular, it can be helpful to have male staff as part of the project. Project staff who truly understand the systems and circumstances can more readily anticipate challenges and support youth in a way that resonates with them. Moreover, staff who have established community connections are better positioned to help youth navigate community resources and supports.

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*When people are...working with dads you've got to have somebody that has that experience, so that when they are up against some adversity and some barriers around systems that don't necessarily agree with engaging fathers, that they don't throw in the towel and give up. I think that we have to also have people that reflect the populations that we serve, and I think that just also helps me, too, in that I look like and have the same background of the people that I'm trying to serve. —Key Partner*

## Parenting-focused curricula are crucial for systems-involved EPY, but existing curricula often need to be adapted or tailored to reflect their needs and circumstances

Family engagement and opportunities to learn to nurture their children were among the most crucial elements that the PAF program attempted to provide EPY. This emphasis on families complemented existing teen pregnancy prevention services. It allowed grantees to focus attention on a range of parenting issues, skills, and relationships among young parents and their families. The implementation of parenting-focused curricula was an important component, and the flexibility of the PAF program allowed grantees to develop or adapt these curricula specifically with the needs and circumstances of EPY in mind.

System-involved youth are dealing with issues that go beyond those of other young parents, and grantees found that existing curricula were not always sufficient to meet their needs. The transience of these youth and the lack of suitable physical space makes many traditional curricula difficult to deliver. In addition, improving family engagement among system-involved youth is often further complicated by legal issues, unresolved or volatile relationships with their own parents, or a problematic history with other institutions.

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*A couple of years ago we looked at our father-specific data...they're about 20% of the population that we work with in total in Michigan. So we were looking at their involvement in other systems, and half of our dads...had been arrested, were on community probation, they had involvements...in the juvenile justice system. Moms are hovering about that same rate, too. But we saw a need and, you know, with our equity lens focus, we wanted to do something working with our fathers. —Grantee*

One grantee recognized the need to serve young fathers involved with the juvenile justice system.

To meet the needs of these fathers, this grantee partnered with a community member who developed the *Son to a Father* curriculum. This curriculum is specifically for incarcerated young fathers based on his own experience as a teen father and later working in detention centers. The evidence-informed 12-lesson curriculum focuses on healthy relationships, sexual health, and parenting skills. The following features made it a good fit for this population:

- Facilitators with lived experience of being a teen parent, or system involvement, or both;
- Stand-alone lessons, to accommodate the transient nature of the population;
- A space just for young fathers to think about their own childhoods in relation to becoming a parent;
- Relevant examples (e.g., sports analogies) to increase engagement;
- Ways to parent and gain parenting skills while incarcerated; and
- A focus on preparation for home visits and re-entry once they are going home permanently (including determining an arrangement with their co-parent).

For another grantee, the evidence-based *Nurturing Parenting* curriculum was a good fit in juvenile detention facilities and group homes. The curriculum offers a version that specifically addresses development of skills as teen parents. An initial assessment helps to determine which courses are appropriate, and content can be tailored for the specific circumstances of each young parent. The foundation of the program is that parenting is learned. The program addresses the family as a system; it stresses empathy in all family members and intends to help both parents and children increase their self-esteem and develop positive self-concepts. The biggest obstacle to implementation initially was space in which to deliver the curriculum. In some instances, PAF project staff were able to work with facility staff to create safe, private spaces where they could work with youth and their families.



## Conclusion

The PAF program was particularly beneficial for these three grantees who chose to serve the subset of youth who were system involved. The flexibility of the PAF program and its emphasis on services that address the social, emotional, and behavioral health of youth and their families was well suited to this particularly vulnerable group of EPY. Through strategic partnerships and a positive youth development approach to specialized case management, grantees provided tailored services for young families and better coordination of those services, particularly with navigating bureaucratic requirements of multiple systems.

Key to successful implementation were staff who understood the circumstances of these youth, established rapport, and advocated for them in a way that was previously not possible. Having PAF project staff work within the child welfare and juvenile justice systems was essential to raising awareness of the acute needs of these young parents and finding ways to better support them.

All of the grantees spoke to the importance of the PAF program being able to provide parenting-focused services specifically for system-involved EPY. These specialized parenting education and services can help these youth reconcile difficult past experiences and contribute to creating a better childhood for their own children.

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