Increasing the Odds for Success: Investing in Technical Assistance for Grantees

Get IN Chicago believes strongly that among our funded partners in youth violence reduction work, there need to be experts in discrete areas of service who can provide support to those organizations working directly with youth. Given the challenges in recruiting and serving acutely high-risk youth, ongoing training and technical assistance need to be a consistent part of overall program implementation and a priority for funders.

Two of GIC's major technical assistance partners include ICOY (Illinois Coalition On Youth) and Mentor Illinois. We asked them to share their perspectives in their own words on the work they've done with other Get IN Chicago grantees.

Amanda McMillen
ICOY
Technical Assistance for Therapy Providers

"[It's] important to have buy-in and collaboration at multiple levels within each organization and ideally to have the voice of participants at the table as well."

Goals: "The focus of the technical assistance provided by ICOY was to support sites in providing SPARCS (Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress) services to hard-to-reach youth. This included the coordination of training on the curricula; individual site visits and phone calls to help with session planning and logistics; observation of sessions to ensure fidelity to the model; strengthening services and improving community engagement. We also structured learning collaboratives across partner agencies to enhance communication and service collaboration."

Challenges: "The largest challenge providers faced was identifying and engaging the target youth into a long-term treatment model. Acutely high-risk youth are hard to locate and engage in general, but when you add to that the cultural barriers and stigma that may exist around mental health and trauma, you've really got some obstacles to overcome in getting kids into therapy.

One strategy here was to more closely connect the SPARCS providers with the mentoring agencies, who already had relationships with some of the youth.

All the organizations were open to engagement and transparent about their successes and challenges within the program."

Best Practice: "It's important in providing technical assistance to take the time upfront to listen

to providers and understand their journey, mission, purpose and strategies. This lays a foundation for providing the resources that will help them most in delivering on their mission. It is also important to have buy-in and collaboration at multiple levels within each organization and ideally to have the voice of participants at the table as well. Finally, providing tools that help clarify expectations, roles and responsibilities, and linkages between services can be very effective in creating sustainability."

Takeaway: "ICOY learned a great deal about the amazing work being done by providers across the city to support acutely high-risk youth."

Cheryl Howard-Neal
Mentor Illinois
Technical Assistance for Mentoring Organizations

"It's all about relationships."

Goals: "Mentor Illinois worked with the full cohort of mentoring organizations on elements of their program design and ways to better align and report on their day-to-day work with youth to meet the objectives of the Get IN Chicago grant. We also worked with the organizations on being more intentional with the time they spent with their youth to ensure mentees were getting the tools and resources needed to be successful in addition to having a caring adult in their life. We provided professional development training and coaching for the mentors and leaders of the organizations on topics such as goal setting, developing successful partnerships, mentoring from a trauma-informed lens and creating a system of self-care."

Challenges: "We spent a significant amount of time looking at best practices for youth engagement given how challenging it can be, especially with the acutely high- risk population. We worked on building trust and better framing what help we were offering youth to increase participation. As mentors and mentoring organizations, if we can't get youth to engage in a meaningful way – we can't support them.

MENTOR Illinois also worked with the leaders of the mentoring organizations on how to coach and manage their mentors to be more effective and deliberate in their interactions with youth and in how they could better utilize their teams. We encouraged mentors to share caseloads and to be less siloed in their approach to working with youth. The more youth are connected to and engaged with various mentors in an organization, the more likely youth will want to participate in programming.

The mentoring organizations brought an incredible amount of dedication, passion and cultural competence to this often-challenging work. Mentors were able to meet youth where they were-- without judgement--and to provide guidance and much needed support. Without adequate capacity, though, it can be hard to both do the work and collect and interpret data to further inform that work. **Across the mentoring cohort, we saw significant improvement in how they learned to think about and track data points and program outcomes**. We encouraged them to blend both the anecdotal elements of their work with hard-core metrics in order to show a comprehensive view of accomplishments and impacts. MENTOR Illinois also saw the mentoring organizations provide greater formalized training, professional development and supervision for their mentors to ensure they had the right tools, skill sets and support to succeed in their roles."

Best Practice: "To provide good coaching and technical assistance, you must first meet the organizations where they are. To start, you need to get a clear understanding of what they are doing well, and what challenges or barriers exist. Once you have their perspective, you can begin to see the program through their lens. The next step is to ask questions. As a coach or technical assistance provider, you can bring a fresh set of eyes and experiences to the organization you're supporting. You provide them the framework and resources they need to make changes. Solutions they come up with help create buy-in at the organizational level, which will help the solutions endure and gain traction."

Takeaway: "More than anything, working with the Get IN Chicago mentoring cohort helped us appreciate all the hard work needed to connect and engage acutely at-risk youth in programming. They face many challenges, both big and small. In youth mentoring, we often say it is all about the relationship. But how do you establish a relationship with a young person who has never had a positive relationship with an adult? How do you convince them that this time, things will be different? **We learned that mentoring this unique population takes additional time, patience and consistent effort.** We also learned that mentors who work with this population must be flexible, resourceful and show up authentically. It was our privilege to help support the GIC mentoring cohort in doing this life-changing work."