INCREASING PERMANENCY RATES FOR OLDER YOUTH **IN FOSTER CARE**

CAPSTONE

SPRING
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DEDICATION

This capstone project is dedicated to the YouthServe organization. YouthServe is an anonymized name to protect the organization's identity. This is done out of respect for the stakeholders who participated in the interviews, which inform most of the project findings.

Despite removing the names of the organization and participants, you know who you are. I am truly honored and grateful that you have allowed me to partner with you on this project. I am in awe of the commitment demonstrated by the board, staff, and volunteers. I am in awe of the strength, candor, and authenticity shown by the youth when we spoke.

I can offer no simple insights or answers through this work, but I sincerely hope the findings and recommendations are in service to your ability to continue the good and important work you do. I truly *thank you* for allowing me to conduct this capstone.

Table of Contents

01

Executive Summary

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

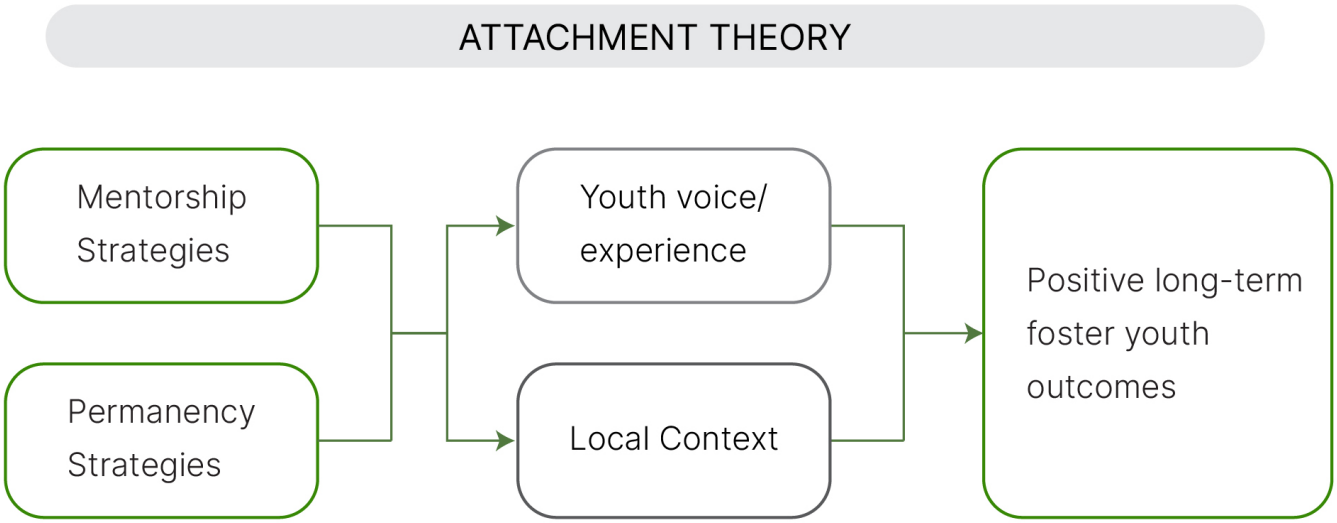
YouthServe is a small nonprofit located in a mid-sized city along the east coast of the United States. Committed to increasing the positive outcomes of the older youth it serves, the organization has created a community of volunteer adults to support older youth in foster care. The YouthServe model holds that by enabling youth and volunteer adults to build relationships (through mentorship, shared experiences at YouthServe program events, and youth overnight host weekend visits with volunteers), the likelihood of adoption and permanent guardianship for the youth would also increase. However, adoption and guardianship rates remain low.

YouthServe hopes to better understand this problem of practice for several reasons. First, nationwide statistics suggest older youth in foster care are the least likely to be adopted (Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Second, youth who emancipate from foster care face higher odds of negative outcomes, including unstable housing, poor mental and physical health, and poor economic outcomes (Bussiere, 2006; Cowan, 2004; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Greeson et al., 2015; Kushel et al., 2007; Stott, 2012; Thompson et al., 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A literature review helped to inform how mentorship and permanency-based strategies might enhance positive long-term outcomes for youth in foster care. Drawing on the literature, I developed a conceptual framework for investigating mentorship and permanency-focused strategies for older youth in foster care. Grounded in attachment theory, this conceptual framework holds that these two strategies must be informed by, and attend to, both local context and youth voice and experience. Therefore, strategies should be adjusted based on these two components to reach the ultimate goal of positive long-term outcomes for older youth in foster care.

Conceptual Framework



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The conceptual framework informed the research design in exploration of four research questions:

1. What are the outcomes for older youth in foster care in the city in which the nonprofit is located, and how do YouthServe metrics compare?
2. How do YouthServe stakeholders experience the organization's volunteer recruitment, mentor training, and program event activities?
3. How do YouthServe stakeholders experience mentor matching and mentorship?
4. How do YouthServe stakeholders perceive the organization's host weekend and adoption initiatives?

DATA ANALYSIS SUMMARY

Three data sources were used to address the research questions.

- **City Foster Youth Data**
  Publicly available data from the local child and family services agency within the YouthServe host city enabled a comparison of citywide trends of youth in foster care to those youth supported by YouthServe. This data included the volume of older youth in foster care, and the volume of youth exiting care by age group.

- **YouthServe Trend Data**
  YouthServe leadership provided multi-year metrics on the volume of volunteers and youth who participated in the organization activities, including the year-over-year volumes of mentor-mentee matches, host weekend matches, and adoptions.

- **Interviews**
  I conducted twenty-three interviews with YouthServe stakeholders, including board members, staff, volunteers, and youth. The interview questions were based both on the research questions and the stakeholder group and can be found in the appendix.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

Ultimately, the data analysis informed twelve evidence-based findings, as summarized below:

RESEARCH QUESTION
01

What are the outcomes for older youth in foster care in the city in which the nonprofit is located, and how do YouthServe metrics compare?

Adoption/Guardianship Outcomes

YouthServe's adoption/guardianship outcomes mirror that of outcomes in the local foster care system.

Emancipation

Emancipation is a likely outcome for teenage youth served both by city foster care and YouthServe. Therefore, YouthServe plays an important role in providing support to emancipated youth.

Reunification

While YouthServe does not track reunification outcomes, the city-wide data shows that for the small percentage of teens age 13-18 who exit care, reunification is often as likely an outcome as guardianship.

RESEARCH QUESTION 02

How do YouthServe stakeholders experience the organization's volunteer recruitment, mentor training, and program event activities?

Recruitment

Stakeholders describe the needs for adjustments to the current recruitment strategies.

Program Events

Program events create a community for youth, both with adults and other youth. Often, the events nourish micro communities more than the 1:1 adult and young person interaction that is theorized to lead to mentor matching and host weekends.

Mentor Training

Trust and trauma are woven into the mentoring experience, and additional resources would be valued by youth and volunteers.

Training and Event Needs

Emancipation creates unique challenges and requires different support for youth and mentors.

RESEARCH QUESTION 03

How do YouthServe stakeholders experience mentor matching and mentorship?

Mentor Matching

Mentor matching has challenges. Adults find building rapport difficult, while youth prefer to connect with several adults because it is less risky and more beneficial.

Mentoring

The mentor role is fluid and carries several identities that shift over time. Deep relationships that last over time are often associated with a supportive community surrounding them.

RESEARCH QUESTION
04

How do YouthServe stakeholders perceive the organization's host weekend and adoption initiatives?

Host Weekend

Volunteers voice confusion on the purpose of host weekends, citing examples of why mentoring makes more sense for them than hosting.

Adoption

YouthServe influenced adult views of adoption, but many noted they did not plan to adopt.

Additional Finding

Permanency & Community

The concepts of permanency and community are interwoven in the YouthServe experience for volunteers and youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

Based on the findings, I offer six interrelated recommendations for YouthServe.

RECOMMENDATION
01

Align activities to the YouthServe value proposition

YouthServe stakeholders generally believe the largest value offered by the organization is a permanent community of caring adults to support youth currently in or who have emancipated from foster care. The first recommendation is that YouthServe align its program activities toward increasing engagement from an individual to a community centered model, and from short-term to a longer-term centered model.

RECOMMENDATION
02

Increase community focus for new volunteers

YouthServe stakeholders describe the needs for adjustments to current recruitment strategies, and YouthServe metrics point to a decrease in active volunteers and in new mentor-mentee matches. The second recommendation is that YouthServe broaden its new volunteer orientation. Specifically, YouthServe could offer new volunteers the current volunteer roles available (including event attendance, mentorship, host parenting, or adoption) but could also offer an additional volunteer role, such as a committed community member. Recommendation Five will define this further.

RECOMMENDATION
03

Nourish micro-communities through program events

YouthServe stakeholders describe events as opportunities to nourish micro-communities with specific interests and needs. The third recommendation is that YouthServe should increasingly build intentional programs tailored towards the micro-communities that exist. For example, events centered on the needs of emancipated youth, of youth specific community building, of adult and youth micro-community needs, and trauma-informed events are all opportunities for micro-community needs to be addressed.

RECOMMENDATION
04

Expand mentorship options beyond single youth and mentor

YouthServe stakeholders point to the changing and fluid nature of a sustained mentoring relationship. Many youth desire multiple mentors and many stakeholders cite the importance of a community to sustain mentoring relationships. The fourth recommendation is that YouthServe should expand its mentorship options beyond a single adult to a single youth. This could include several adults mentoring a single youth, several youth being mentored by a single adult, and expanding the pool of potential youth mentors to include non-parental adults who already exist within a young person's life (also known as natural mentoring).

RECOMMENDATION
05

Formalize the role of committed community member

YouthServe volunteers find their role to be both fluid and confusing. The fifth recommendation is that YouthServe should formalize the role of a committed community member. This role would be defined by long-term versus ad hoc engagement with YouthServe through visible and consistent participation with YouthServe community members (including adults and youth). Tailored contributions could be made based on individual volunteers' skills, such as a skillset in creating program events, supporting job search or college preparation, or deeper engagement within the foster care system. This role requires a volunteer to wear a YouthServe community membership identity.

RECOMMENDATION
06

Connect adoption focus to YouthServe value proposition

YouthServe adoption outcomes are limited, as are overall adoption outcomes within its city and nationwide. The final recommendation is that YouthServe should add to its adoption focus a deeper connection to its value proposition of long-term community. Specifically, it should add a permanent community function to support host and adoptive families of older youth in care, whether these families were built through YouthServe or otherwise.

02

Introduction

Across the United States, over 20,000 youth in foster care age out, or emancipate, from the foster care system every year (Ahmann, 2017; Crawford et al., 2018). Often, without an adequate support system as they enter young adulthood, these individuals face unsettling odds, including unstable housing, unemployment, incarceration, and poor mental and physical health outcomes (Bussiere, 2006; Cowan, 2004; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Greeson et al., 2015; Kushel et al., 2007; Stott, 2012; Thompson et al., 2016). YouthServe, whose name has been anonymized and whose true identity has been kept confidential, is a nonprofit dedicated to changing these odds within its host city along the east cost of the United States.

Within its host city, approximately 45 to 50 youth in care emancipate from the local foster care system each year (Local Child and Family Services Agency, 2021). Through creating a community of caring volunteer adults, YouthServe seeks to establish positive longer term permanency outcomes for teenage youth in foster care. Ultimately, the organization hopes there will be increasing rates of adoption and guardianship outcomes for the youth it serves. Unfortunately, while the organization has created a community of caring and committed volunteer adults, very few, if any, permanent adoption outcomes have occurred for the youth participating in YouthServe's programming.

The aim of this capstone project is to evaluate the YouthServe program model to determine what elements contribute or do not contribute to its focus on positive permanent outcomes for local youth in foster care. Using multi-year metrics provided by YouthServe and gathered by its host city's local child and family services agency, and through nearly two dozen semi-structured interviews with YouthServe stakeholders ranging from board members to staff, volunteers, and youth, this capstone study resulted in several findings that inform YouthServe's strengths and opportunities to enhance its impact on positive outcomes for youth in care.

03

Organizational Context

The name of the organization has been anonymized and will be referenced as YouthServe, out of respect for the confidentiality of stakeholder participants who took part in this capstone project.

HISTORY

In the early 2000s, a local nonprofit began through a five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The organization focused on increasing adoption and permanent guardianship for local youth in foster care through connecting youth with volunteer adults for overnight weekend host visits at the volunteer's home, adult-mentor and youth-mentee relationships, and community interactive activities (YouthServe, 2021).

When the five-year grant ended, the desire to continue a local nonprofit dedicated explicitly to supporting older youth remained. The result was YouthServe, a 501(c)3 established in 2011. In its first year, the new nonprofit served 30 local teens in foster care through 20 community events, 11 mentor and mentee connections, 8 host family connections, and ultimately supporting 12 youth in foster care to establish permanency through adoption or legal guardianship (YouthServe, 2021). Currently, the goal of YouthServe

is to create a supportive community of adults and older youth in foster care by establishing lifelong connections between the youth it serves and the adults who volunteer with the organization. YouthServe remains a small and local organization, with total reported revenue of around $200,000 in 2019, and a direct staff of three individuals as of early 2021.

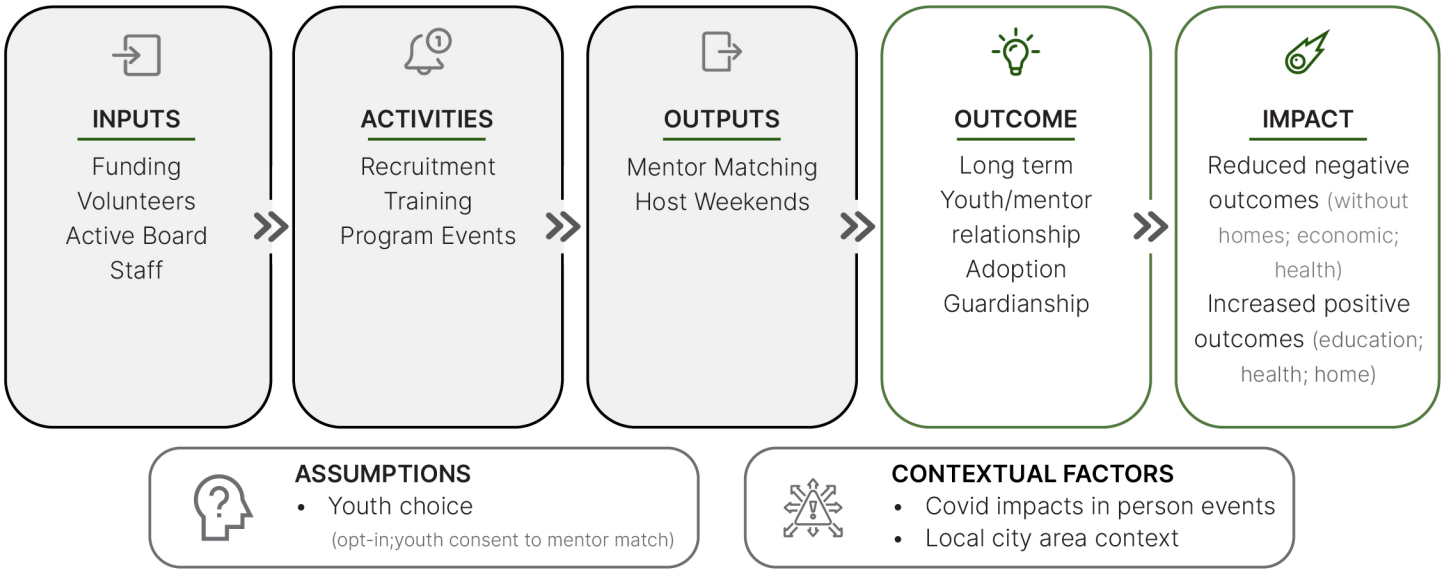
CURRENT OFFERINGS AND MISSION

Within its local focus, the organization executes its mission through the following logic model, program definitions, and resulting core metrics that demonstrate its work in recent years.

LOGIC MODEL

In consultation with program stakeholders, including the YouthServe Executive Director and several board members, the first capstone activity was to develop and validate the program's logic model. The organization's logic model (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018 [CDC]) is represented by Figure 1 below. The organization seeks to achieve the outcomes noted here, which include long-term youth/mentor relationships and permanency outcomes for youth as measured by adoption and guardianship. To achieve these outcomes, YouthServe focuses its activities on recruiting adult volunteers, training them, and hosting program events in which volunteer adults and youth in foster care can interact. Through these activities, YouthServe creates a setting for adult volunteers and youth to build relationships through which mentor-mentee matching, and opportunities for adult volunteers to commit to hosting youth on overnight weekend visits can occur. These outputs, YouthServe believes, serve to enhance the likelihood of achieving its desired outcomes.

Figure 1: *YouthServe Logic Model*



PROGRAM DEFINITIONS

YouthServe's activities, outputs, and outcomes serve as the building blocks upon which this capstone is designed. Therefore, key features of the organization are described below:

➲ Volunteer Recruitment

As of mid-2021, YouthServe had 30 active volunteers, down from a 73 in 2019, (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). YouthServe volunteers serve as a critical resource for the organization. Active volunteers can serve in several roles, including mentoring youth individually and attending program events to build relationships with youth. The adult volunteers are core to YouthServe's commitment of creating a community of caring volunteer adults to support youth in care.

YouthServe has leveraged several strategies to source volunteers in the past, including attending community festivals, publishing articles on the importance of its work, and engaging in social media platforms to raise awareness. However, in recent years, it has not dedicated substantial efforts to actively source new prospective volunteers, partly because it has a stable volume of new volunteers approaching YouthServe directly. These new prospective volunteers often find YouthServe either through word-of-mouth, or by simply learning about YouthServe when researching volunteer organizations within the city that support young people.

Volunteer Training

YouthServe offers several trainings, including an initial volunteer orientation and a required mentorship training for prospective mentors. Additionally, for volunteers who are considering adoption, or are willing to host youth overnight on scheduled weekend visits, YouthServe covers the expenses for volunteers to take the required trainings provided by the local adoption agencies.

The orientation training is relatively short, lasting one to two hours. It is for new and prospective volunteers, in which volunteers learn about the possible volunteer roles they can play. These roles include attending program events, becoming a mentor, participating in host parenting weekends, and, ultimately, becoming a prospective adoptive parent.

YouthServe offers a more in-depth training, requiring a 6-to-8-hour commitment for volunteers who wish to become mentors. This training is followed by several required clearances that volunteers must complete, including background checks, fingerprinting, and submission of driving records. For prospective host or adoptive parents, YouthServe will pay for volunteers to take the additional training required by social services, and for the cost of the required home study.

Program Events

YouthServe hosts program events on at least a monthly basis. The purpose is to bring together youth in foster care and adult volunteers to engage in a shared experience. Ultimately, through creating a shared experience, YouthServe hopes to build a community in which adults and youth can build relationships that grow into mentor-mentee relationships and potentially host weekend experiences.

The events can be varied in nature, ranging from large events with many attendees to smaller, more intimate events with a limited number of attendees. Examples of events include attending adventure parks, community cleanup events, shared cooking experiences, and birthday and holiday gatherings.

Mentoring

YouthServe defines mentoring as a consistent presence of a volunteer adult in a teenager's life. Adult mentors are matched as relationships evolve. As adults and youth build rapport at program events, a mentoring match is made when both the adult and the youth make active decisions to formalize a mentor relationship.

Adult mentors must commit to remaining a consistent presence for at least 2 years as a mentor. Additionally, adult mentors are required to complete the training process, which includes formal training and required legal clearances.

- **Host Weekends**

  YouthServe promotes the concept of host parenting, in which volunteer adults commit to hosting a teen in foster care at their homes for several weekend visits. YouthServe requires a commitment of two weekends per month for four months when a host weekend match is made.

  Like mentor matching, YouthServe anticipates volunteer host parents meet teens in advance of a host weekend match. The purpose of host weekends is for adults to provide youth with more intensive mentoring and exposure to new life experiences. YouthServe anticipates that host weekend experiences can increase the likelihood for adoption of youth, either by the host parents or by other adults within the volunteer adult's community.

- **Adoption & Guardianship**

  YouthServe ultimately hopes that its work in conducting events and enabling mentor and host matches will lead to an increased rate of adoption for teens in foster care. The organization notes that not all teens identify adoption as part of their permanency goals, but they hope to increase the rates of adoption or guardianship for those teens who do seek it.

  Guardianship is a similar permanency outcome, in which the youth exits care through a legal guardianship arrangement, without requiring the youth's parents to terminate all parental rights. Importantly, both adoption and permanent guardianship are permanent legal arrangements in which a youth can exit the foster care system.

CORE METRICS

In recent years, YouthServe tracked several metrics. A summary of key metrics is in Table 1: YouthServe Metrics. These include its volume of active volunteers, (including those who completed all required training and clearances to become mentors or host families), volume of youth served through its programming, (including those new to YouthServe, and those who have emancipated from the foster care system at age 21), volume of mentor-match pairings, (including new and existing pairs), and volume of host, foster, and adoptive parenting matches.

Table 1: *YouthServe Metrics*

	'17	'18	'19	'20	MID '21
Total Active Volunteers	**51**	**65**	**73**	**45**	**30**
Number of volunteers who became ready-to-match mentors (training + clearances)	5	6	3	4	10
Number of ready-to-match mentors who remain unmatched	3	1	3	5	9
Number of host families ready to match (training/ home study complete)	1	0	1	1	0
Total Youth in Program	**32**	**36**	**40**	**36**	**35**
Total youth <21 active in Program	30	28	27	18	18
Total aged out in Program	2	8	13	18	17
Newly referred teens to Program	5	5	6	4	5
Total Mentor-Mentee Matches	**22**	**30**	**28**	**25**	**31**
New mentor-mentee matches	7	7	1	3	3
Existing mentor-mentee matches	6	13	14	8	11
Mentor-mentee matches with aged out youth	9	10	13	14	17
Total Host Parent Matches	**0**	**0**	**2**	**1**	**0**
Total Foster Parent Matches	**1**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Total Adoption Placements for Youth in Program	**1**	**1**	**0**	**2**	**1**
Number of teens who met family through organization	0	0	0	0	1
Total Finalized Adoptions for Youth in Program	**0**	**2**	**1**	**1**	**0**
Number of teens who met family through organization	0	1	0	0	0

Based on these metrics, the following trends ultimately informed the problem of practice.

- The volume of active volunteers is decreasing over time. This is potentially influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The volume of youth served by the organization has remained relatively steady. However, increasingly, YouthServe has been serving a higher percentage of emancipated youth, which now makes up nearly half of the youth in the YouthServe program.
- Each year, a handful of new teens in foster care are referred to YouthServe.
- YouthServe's volume of mentor-mentee matched pairs has remained steady over time. However, very few new mentor-mentee matches are made each year.
- Increasingly, matched mentor pairs represent mentorships with emancipated youth.
- Very few, if any, host parenting or adoption matches are made each year.

04

Problem of Practice

The YouthServe model holds that by enabling local youth in foster care and volunteer adults to build relationships (through mentorship, events, and host weekend visits), the likelihood of adoption and permanent guardianship for the youth would also increase. However, adoption and permanency rates remain low.

This capstone study is an exploration of how the organization's volunteer recruitment, events, and volunteer training model serve its broad objective of helping teens achieve permanency through adoption or guardianship, and to identify additional programmatic strategies that may enhance the organization's efforts to increase the likelihood of teen adoption.

The problem of practice is informed by three interrelated factors: the theoretical framework offered by attachment theory, permanency statistics associated with teenage youth in foster care, and the long-term outcomes associated with emancipated youth.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment theory offers a way to understand YouthServe's mission. John Bowlby introduced this theory and Mary Ainsworth expanded it. Attachment theory is an evolutionary, psychological theory that is focused on relationships between humans. It can be used, therefore, to highlight the consequences of a child's disrupted attachment to caretakers early in life and relational, behavioral, and emotional implications of attachments in building childhood and adult relationships (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 2005). Attachment behavior, such as attachments to adults as a young person, is something YouthServe has built its entire initiative around.

The attachment theory posits that starting in infancy, interaction with responsive attachment figures (primarily parents) creates attachment security, which supports an individual when distressing scenarios arrive (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). However, when attachment security is not created, or is disrupted, as is the case for many youth in foster care, the individual creates strategies to manage distress, including heightened avoidance strategies and heightened anxiety (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2005). Mary Ainsworth (1979) observed insecure attachment strategies in children characterized by either an anxious style, where the child demonstrates great distress in the absence of a caretaker, or an avoidant style, where a child shows little response in the absence or return of a caretaker. Further, secure, and insecure attachment styles built in childhood remained evident well into adulthood (Hazen & Shaver, 1987), highlighting the long-term influence of early disrupted attachments.

Research suggests that attachment styles are not immutable later in life and can be influenced by experiences later in life (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Given this, YouthServe's desire to create a long-term community for youth in foster care through mentoring and events in which youth and invested adults participate consistently can be explored through a lens of whether, and if so how, such experiences can influence youth attachment approaches to committed adult volunteers. Attachment theory provides useful theoretical framework to understand youth in foster care as they approach adulthood, particularly with respect to their engagement with prospective adult mentors, guardians, or caretakers.

OLDER YOUTH ADOPTION

YouthServe's focus on older youth in foster care is because, as they note, they believe this demographic is the least likely to be adopted. This concern is grounded in facts. Several studies have shown that the likelihood of adoption drops substantially for children ages 12 or older (Bussier, 2006). U.S. statistics

point to the decline in likelihood of youth in foster care finding permanency as they age, with only 10% of 2019 adoptions occurring for youth ages 13 or older, and only 5% of adoptions for youth ages 15 or older (Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).

These findings are further supported by the elevated volume of youth in foster care who ultimately age out of foster care. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. DHHS) data from 2006 through 2010, the volume of youth who age out, or emancipate, increased 46%, from 20,172 to 29,471 (Greeson et al., 2015). While this number came down to 20,289 aging out in 2015 (Ahmann, 2017; Crawford et al., 2018), a significant percentage of foster youth who remain in care are older youth. In 2019, 30% of older youth in foster care were age 11 or older, and 7% (or approximately 8,500) were over age 15, according to the Annie E Casey Foundation (n.d.).

EMANCIPATION OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

With so many youths at risk of aging out, YouthServe hopes to create a community for youth through lasting relationships with adults, noting that expecting a 21-year-old emancipated youth to thrive without such invested adult connections does not lead to positive outcomes (YouthServe, 2021).

YouthServe's focus on lasting adult relationships is supported by research, which shows that outcomes for emancipated youth are poor. Specifically, many researchers found that youth in foster care who age out are at far higher risk of difficult outcomes such as lack of housing, criminal justice involvement, negative physical, mental and behavioral health outcomes, and economic hardship (Bussiere, 2006; Cowan, 2004; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Greeson et al., 2015; Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016; Kushel et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2016; Stott, 2012; Yen et al., 2007).

Notably, emancipated youth often face lack of housing and housing instability. A 1990 study of 55 youth who emancipated from care showed that nearly 30% of youth reported they had experienced homelessness since exiting foster care (Barth, 1990). Kushel et al. (2007) found in their analysis of 345 emancipated youth outcomes that although just 14.2% experienced homelessness, this number spiked to 39.4% reporting unstable housing. The results of this study also indicated a strong correlation between lack of housing and likelihood of youth being uninsured and facing unmet healthcare needs (Kushel et al., 2007). Other researchers, such as Stott (2012), found up to 40% of emancipated youth experienced lack of housing at some point.

05

Literature Review

Through an attachment theory lens, a literature review informed how connections are built by older youth in foster care through both youth mentorship and permanency studies. While research is limited on the explicit connection between youth mentorship as a leading indicator for adoption, mentorship and adoption are core to the work of YouthServe in providing youth with a community of caring adults. Researchers have validated the importance of youth connection with caring adults, including through mentorship and adoption, citing the negative consequences of youth leaving the foster care system through emancipation or aging out without such connections.

WHY CONNECTIONS MATTER

Emancipated youth with less connections to others, as measured by supportive social networks, mentors, or others in the community, are more likely to face the poor outcomes cited earlier according to a variety of studies. Dworsky's and Courtney's (2009) analysis of Barth's 1990 longitudinal study of youth in foster care focused explicitly on the risk of experiencing homelessness as youth transition from foster care to adulthood. They found that feeling close to at least one family member reduced the odds of experiencing homelessness by 68%. Because youth in foster care, by definition, have been removed from the care

of their biological parents in most cases, maintaining a feeling of closeness with other adults may be a challenge for those who age out of foster care. Many of these youth have navigated living through many home placements during their time in foster care, yet ultimately emancipate without ever finding permanency through adoption or guardianship. Additionally, ties that these youth once had (to relatives, former foster families, educators, and others) are often lost or severed through either deliberate child welfare policies or neglect (Bussiere, 2006).

Crawford et al. (2018) found in their study of over 1,400 youth in foster care who aged out between 2009 and 2013, the average number of placements that youth lived in, whether in foster or group homes, was 13. Each placement that a youth in care faced prior to emancipation was correlated with a 1.04x increase in odds of facing felony adjudication within the criminal justice system (Crawford et al., 2018), suggesting connection between limited long-term attachment in a home and poor outcomes. Stott (2012) found a similar theme through 114 interviews with emancipated youth. After controlling for a host of variables, Stott found as the number of home care placements each youth faced increased, likelihood of post emancipation substance abuse increased, a statistically significant finding. Consistent with this theme, Reilly (2003) found that those emancipated youth who reported having a smaller social network were significantly more likely to experience homelessness after exiting foster care (and those who reported a larger social support network were significantly more likely to report satisfaction in their lives).

Given the volume of youth emancipating from the foster care system, the poor outcomes associated with such a status, and the studies suggesting the importance of establishing a support network, the focus of YouthServe on both mentorship and youth permanency is not surprising. Reviewing the literature about mentorship and permanency for older youth in foster care will inform the identified problem of practice and the conceptual framework for this capstone study.

MENTORSHIP AND OLDER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Mentorship represents an opportunity to develop a secure attachment between a youth and a caring adult (Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017). A broad literature review surfaced three core themes surrounding older youth in foster care and mentorship. These include mid- to long-term impact of mentorship, natural mentoring, and programmatic strategies to support youth mentorship. Each of these offers insights about the utility of mentorship as a long-term strategy to connect youth in foster care with adults through a beneficial and relational attachment.

IMPACT OF MENTORSHIP

Several researchers reported the positive influence of youth mentorship programs and a reduction in some of the negative risks that emancipated youth in foster care face. The reduction in risk of experiencing homelessness, poor health outcomes, high rates of interaction with the justice system, and poor economic outcomes is compelling but limited (Greeson et al., 2015). Munson and McMillen (2009) studied 339 older youth in foster care and found that after controlling for a variety of factors, youth who had a mentoring relationship were significantly less likely to report many depressive symptoms, and significantly less likely to be arrested. The results of DuBois' 2011 meta-analysis of 73 mentor evaluations showed that youth who had a strong mentoring relationship were, indeed, less likely to face delinquency outcomes, drug use, and poor academic achievement; the effect sizes were small to moderate (ranging from 0.11 to 0.29) (Thompson et al., 2016).

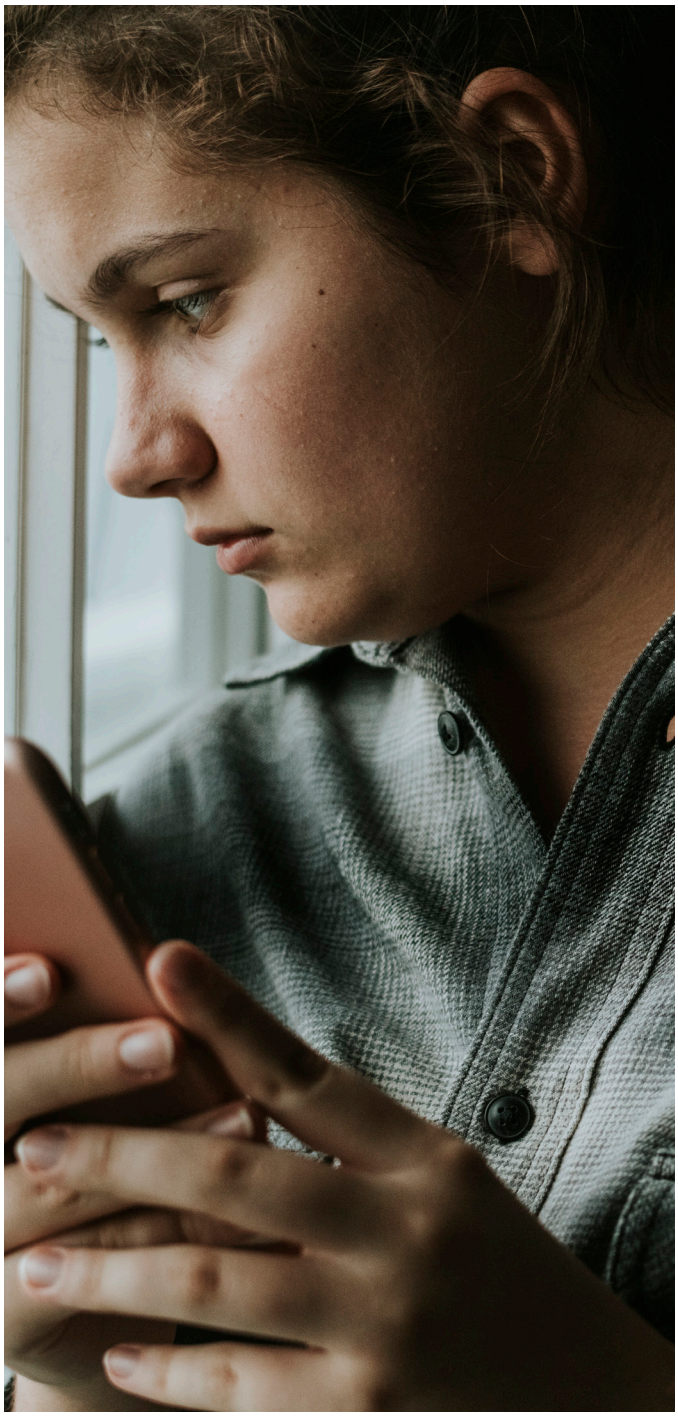
In addition to risk reduction of negative outcomes, the positive influences of youth mentorship are notable. Munson and McMillen (2009), for example, found that after controlling for both race and ethnicity, presence of a mentor was significantly associated with lower levels of stress and with higher life satisfaction. Similarly, a 2005 study based on an analysis of the public National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health dataset showed that youth who reported having mentors were more likely to complete high school, maintain employment, and report higher self-esteem and life satisfaction (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Additionally in Day's et al. (2015) testimony transcript analysis of 43 former and current youth in foster care, the most frequent barrier to educational attainment cited was a lack of supportive relationship with caring adults.

The varied types of positive influence of mentoring on youth in foster care are evident, with researchers reporting benefits ranging from role modeling on successful adulthood (Bonilla et al., 2020), to positive psychosocial and behavioral youth outcomes (Thompson et al., 2016; Salazar et al., 2018), to increased youth likelihood of improved physical health, maintaining bank accounts, and resiliency building (Salazar et al., 2018). Overall, mentorship attachments influence post emancipation outcomes in positive ways. One mentorship strategy arose in the literature review as especially salient for youth in foster care, natural mentoring.

NATURAL MENTORING

Natural mentoring can be defined as a sustained (over a long period of time) presence and availability of an adult who is not the youth's parent but who is part of the youth's social network (Thompson et al., 2016). The concept of natural mentoring faces an implicit challenge for older youth in foster care, however, given what is often multiple home placements in their foster experience and the impact of removal from

their biological families to begin with (Thompson et al., 2016). Youth in foster care often face limited connections to birth families and must navigate the attachment disruptions they experienced being removed from their birth homes. Bowlby's attachment theory suggests that such disruptions in early parental attachments can influence future relational attachments, and a 2018 meta-analysis of youth in foster care, supported this theory. The meta-analysis showed that this group experiences lower quality peer relationships as compared to children raised by their biological family (DeLuca et al., 2018), but also showed that relational attachment challenges are not entirely predetermined.



The findings from the review of literature and previous research raise two questions. First, is natural mentoring a viable strategy to support older youth in foster care? If so, second, what are the strategies that can support youth in identifying natural mentors and building a sustained and beneficial mentoring relationship? While limited, the literature does offer guidance.

Research exploring the influence of natural mentors on youth suggests that the results are optimistic. Greeson's et al. (2015) focus group insights derived from 17 older youth in foster care showed that youth valued natural mentor relationships, with the need for permanent relationships from caring adults as a reoccurring theme in discussion. This finding was consistent with DuBois's and Silverthorn's (2005) study. They found that enduring natural mentoring relationships were positively associated with strong educational outcomes. Thompson et al. (2016) conducted a broader meta-analysis of natural mentoring among adolescent youth in foster care, validating the themes Greeson et al. (2015) found. Here, the meta-analysis showed that natural mentoring

was positively associated with youth wellbeing and improved psychosocial and behavioral outcomes (Thompson et al., 2016).

Given the challenges youth in foster care face in establishing long term relationships with adults, the literature also offers strategies to accelerate relationship development. While these strategies are varied in nature, they suggest a few key insights. First, youth in foster care can identify natural mentors without programmatic intervention, but such interventions increase the number of youth who can benefit from these relationships. Second, trust and longevity, qualities associated with early attachments that were broken when the child was removed from their birth home, remain elements of importance to youth in foster care in mentoring relationships. Finally, support for natural mentors in terms of helping them thrive in their role through trauma-informed strategies is useful.

In studies that obtained perspectives of youth in foster care on what defines a strong natural mentor, the ability of the mentor to be consistent and connected over a long period of time came up frequently (Bonilla et al., 2020; Greeson et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2016). Other qualities youth described as important in a mentor included trustworthiness (including a capacity to help youth reestablish trustworthy relations with an adult) and a sense that the mentor relationship was mutually meaningful to the youth and the adult (Greeson et al., 2016). Additionally, while natural mentors are, by design, adults who exist within a youth's social network, some programmatic elements were found to add to the success of these relationships.

For example, Munson and McMillen (2009) found that approximately half of the youth in foster care they interviewed who had natural mentors found these mentors through formal pathways, such as through the welfare or education systems, compared to the 46% who met their mentors through family and friends. The latter is an important concept to note as youth age out of the system, given Havlicek's (2021) finding across multiple studies that 48 – 61% of emancipated youth reported frequent contact with their birth mother despite legal separation from her. Greeson et al. (2015) focused on an intervention, which ensured natural mentors were trauma-informed to best support youth and were aware of their role in supporting youth in independent skill building. These programmatic elements of mentorship lead to the final mentoring theme in the literature review.

MENTORING PROGRAMMATIC STRATEGIES

Several researchers have sought to understand different programs and approaches to support connection for older youth in foster care, outside of the traditional adoption or guardianship approach. The themes surfaced through these studies are the importance of training for mentors and other non-permanent caretakers, the use of programmatic support for the youth and mentor, and the importance of understanding the desires and context of mentors and non-permanent caretakers.

Because the role of a mentor inherently entails relationship building with a youth, the theme of training for such mentors to best equip them in their role makes sense. Bussiere (2006) argued that mentors must understand youth attachment vulnerabilities, given the youth's history, and that therefore mentorship training on how to establish and end mentor relationships is important. Greeson et al. (2020) offered a consistent training recommendation. After studying midwestern youth in a foster care training program in which mentors were equipped with trauma-informed education, Greeson et al. found that youth connected with these mentors fared better in terms of attachment metrics compared to those at another youth in foster care organization without the mentorship support. Similarly, Greeson et al. studied another natural mentoring intervention program where mentors received trauma-informed training to support youth in foster care, and again results suggested these youth benefitted from the relationships, both through recognizing the caring relationships and through gaining independent living skill building. Consistent with mentorship training on trauma-informed and attachment support, Bussiere (2006) added the importance of explicitly training mentors on relationships ending. Specifically, educating mentors on intentionally being clear, planful, growth promoting, and positive when a mentor-relationship ends is critical to maintain the benefits and growth desired from a mentorship relationship without creating and adding to the attachment challenges that many youth in foster care already face (Bussiere, 2006; Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017).

The literature highlights the importance of additional programmatic interventions to nourish the mentorship relationship. For example, a child welfare based natural mentoring intervention that was studied in a large urban area provided space for weekly sessions with youth in foster care, their mentor, and a trained interventionist. The youth reported the benefits of a third-party interventionist as the mentor/mentee relationship developed (Greeson et al., 2015). The organization also provided group community events for youth and mentors to engage in activities together, which youth described as important bonding time (Greeson et al., 2015). Similarly, Bonilla et al. (2020) studied a Utah based youth in foster care mentorship program in which the organization hosted "speed networking" sessions for potential mentors and youth to meet, enabling youth to voice their preferences in a structured setting. While this did not work for all mentor and mentee relationship connections, it did in many cases and was viewed as a successful means of structuring mentorship connections outside of natural mentoring options (Bonilla et al., 2020). Additionally, in a smaller study, researchers found that through a structured adult and youth in foster care program in high school, youth ultimately voiced strong positive, enduring, and positive connections with adults (Wesley et al., 2020).

Finally, mentorship training and additional programmatic support to nourish the mentor and youth relationship were furthered by mentorship programs inviting the backgrounds and contexts of potential mentors. From understanding the youth's specific attachment-related concerns and history to align with the experience level and capacity of a mentor (Bussiere, 2006), to screening mentors to understand the motivations and commitment levels of caring adults (Bonilla et al., 2020; Goughler & Trunzo, 2005; Greeson et al., 2015; Greeson et al., 2020), organizations that demonstrate success in connecting youth in foster care with long term adult relationships understand that in addition to youth context, the caring-adult's context must be understood.

Together, the literature review suggests that mentor and mentee context, mentoring programmatic support, and the influence of natural mentoring all can play a role in the success of older youth in foster care developing long term attachments with mentors. These themes will inform the conceptual framework, in conjunction with themes derived from the literature concerning permanency for older foster youth.

PERMANENCY FOR OLDER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

While little information exists directly connecting mentorship to permanency outcomes for youth in foster care, the literature does inform what factors are likely to contribute to older youth finding permanency. Increased federal funding was not found to be a factor. While federal funding in support of efforts to help older youth establish permanency has increased, Brehm (2018) found that the incentives did not increase the probability of adoption for older children, largely due to state and county level challenges in translating federal incentives to direct impact in adoption. Separate from the federal funding lens, three themes are noteworthy in the literature, including the broader meaning of permanency, the voice and experience of the youth, and the contextual nature of permanency success.

PERMANENCY AS A BROADER CONCEPT

The goal of achieving permanency when in foster care is generally accepted to mean adoption or permanent guardianship, which is consistent with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Greeson et al., 2015; Salazar et al., 2018; White, 2016). While measures vary, the best estimate of discontinuity, or a return to foster care once permanency has been established, ranges from 2 – 30% overall and potentially higher for older youth in foster care (White, 2016). However, this concept of permanency may be limiting.

Salazar et al. (2018) studied the perception of permanency with 97 foster youth in an urban northeastern part of the United States and found that while most stated that they

had permanency goals (77%), the most frequent theme that youth equated with the meaning of permanency was staying connected with and having supportive loved ones (more than 70%). Greeson's et al. (2015) sentiment that traditional permanency definitions are too narrow is consistent with Salazar's et al. (2018) finding. Bussiere (2006) highlighted a need to shift our permanency approach, instead, to focus on independent living and building relationships with adults who will commit to serving as a role model and long-term connection in both good and difficult times.

A broader understanding of permanency has challenges. Day et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review to derive factors influencing youth adoption and found difficulty due to different interpretations and definitions. Additionally, the broad understanding of permanency in this literature review also intersects with mentorship as being defined as a long-term caring relationship with an adult. Further, as Cowan (2004) highlighted, the legal definitions of permanency incent some welfare practitioners to advise around permanency. For example, in some cases, delaying legalized adoption until a child reaches age 18 or 21 can enable a foster family to get a larger subsidy for a longer time or may enable a child to receive more college tuition assistance, and in other cases, a child may not consent to an adoption out of a desire to remain in their foster home until emancipation (Cowan, 2004).

Disrupting the traditional definition of permanency may create concerns in analyzing data about long term impact of establishing youth permanency. Permanent adoption or guardianship remains important to many in youth in foster care and must remain part of the conception of youth achieving permanency. A broader definition invites a more open concept of establishing permanent attachments, and,

as Greeson et al. (2015) asserted, the narrow legacy definitions inherently assumed that youth who do not attain adoption or guardianship status failed to attain permanence. Finally, the broader definition invites the perspective of youth in foster care, another theme derived in the literature review.

YOUTH VOICE AND EXPERIENCE

To understand factors contributing to permanency, understanding the youth themselves more deeply is a recurring theme in the literature. Specifically, several researchers report the importance of understanding youth individual histories, while others affirm the need to invite youth perspective into permanency dialogues.

While older youth in foster care share a few attributes in common, specifically their age and a separation from their childhood families, they do not share the same life experiences. Understanding a youth's context has implications for permanency. Without context, the risk for failed permanency strategies increases (White, 2016). In White's (2016) investigation of peer-reviewed literature on the subject, he found that parents who reported receiving less information from child welfare agencies about a child's history were more likely to report problems in post permanency (guardianship or adoption).

Understanding a child's history has implications. Rebbe et al. (2017) studied adverse childhood experiences and found that the composition of these experiences, including the types of experiences and the cumulative nature of these experiences had implications in terms of adoption. In their latent class analysis of over 700 former youth in foster care, those with more complex experiences were more likely to face negative adult consequences, such as homelessness and depression, leading the researchers to conclude that treating all youth the same does not serve them. Similarly, Vanderfaeillie et al. (2015) conducted a study across 17 agencies and found older youth were more likely to have faced familial problems early in life and have foster parents report behavioral problems while in care.

Cowan's (2004) research concurs with this sentiment, noting that older children are more likely to suffer from attachment disorders, which Bussiere (2006) noted is an important context to further explore with youth in foster care to understand their specific attachment styles, which can range from dismissive, with difficulty expressing loss or gratitude, to ambivalence, or having difficulty recognizing relationship gains, to disorganized, or having trouble verbalizing needs and feelings with a caregiver. White (2016) built on this, asserting that the resulting problematic behaviors, such as poor social functioning, hyperactivity, and aggression are risk factors for discontinuity in permanency. A deeper understanding of a youth's attachment

led Cowan (2004) to affirm an increased likelihood of permanency success if adopted by a single parent with more dedicated time to reinforce attachment.

Understanding youth attachment styles and needs and conveying these to caregivers, then, is important. Kirby and Hardesty (1998) pointed to the difficulty in achieving this, given that welfare agencies often lack financial resources or adequately trained social workers to conduct the psychological assessments needed for youth. Still, enabling older youth voices to be heard in some capacity has value. Charles' and Nelson's (2000) work suggests that efforts to identify caring adults to support youth are most effective when working with youth to understand who should be considered in support of re-established connections. In general, youth have positive attitudes about adoption and permanency (Diehl et al., 2011). The most important element in welfare planning, Bussiere (2006) argued, is to include youth participation in decisions about their lives.

LOCAL AND CONTEXTUAL NATURE OF PERMANENCY

The final factor concerning permanency and older youth in foster care is that achieving permanency often requires a more local and contextual approach, as opposed to solely global intervention strategies. Studies of programs designed to improve outcomes for older youth have shown that few research-based interventions have worked in all contexts (Greeson et al., 2020). For example, when Park et al. (2020) tried to understand the effects of the extension of federal recognition of foster care status from age 18 to 21 for states that opted in, they found that while many youth did remain in foster care for longer, the use and efficacy of extended care differed considerably by state and county.

Beyond state and county experiential differences, White's (2016) research highlights the need for a more local context as well. White found that while most post-permanency families desire post-adoption services, such services are less effective if services are not flexible, individualized, and better matched to the new family needs. Kirby and Hardesty (1998) had a related finding, noting that gathering teacher, counselor, and academic administrator input on child behavior could influence success in adoption, suggesting that local community partnership and integration has an influence on permanency. Finally, Waid and Alewine (2018) found that permanency support was needed years after adoption, and the personalized nature of the program they studied (a local helpline for adoptive families), which followed families to ensure the support offered met the family needs, played a role in families continuing to use the resource to support success as adoptive children approached adolescence. Because YouthServe is a local organization directly supporting its home city area youth in foster care, this concept suggests it can, indeed, influence permanency for those youth.

BROAD THEMES

If success is defined as permanent and long-term connections between older youth in foster care and caring adults, the literature suggests two broad themes intersect between mentorship and permanency insights. First, the importance of considering youth voice and experience to achieve optimal permanency outcomes is consistent with considering youth experience to derive success in mentoring outcomes. Therefore, inviting youth voice into decisions made about adult mentors and caregivers, when feasible, is important across mentorship and permanency strategies. This intersection, called "youth voice" in the conceptual framework that follows, capitalizes on the concept that older youth are, themselves, an important resource in understanding how to create permanent and long-term connections. The second theme is that both mentoring strategies and the notion of permanency for youth in foster care require a local and contextual approach. This intersection, called "local context" in the conceptual framework that follows, suggests that those programmatic strategies that consider local context are better equipped to enhance positive outcomes for youth in care.

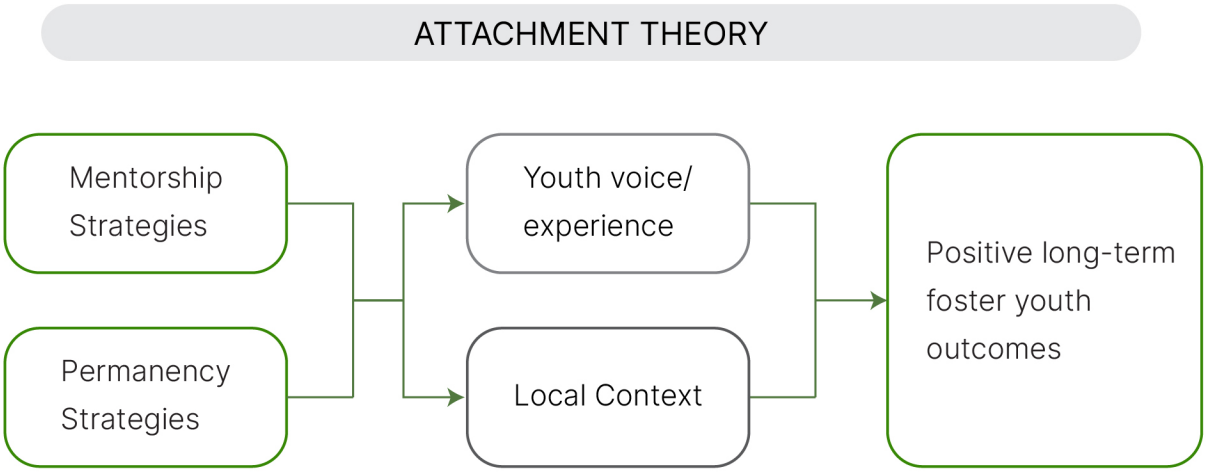
06

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to inform the study design builds on themes derived in the literature review and is displayed in Figure 2: Conceptual Framework, below. The framework connects the broad attachment theory lens to the two focus areas studied, mentorship and permanency. The framework builds on how embracing both a local context (in this case, YouthServe's host city foster context) and a youth-centric model in which youth history, context, and input inform strategy, should support an increase in permanency rate for older youth in foster care.

Data gathered will be informed by this model, aligning to the definitions below.

Figure 2: *Conceptual Framework*



- Attachment Theory: As noted, disrupted caregiver attachment can influence how attachment is formed in future relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). While consequences of this are not immutable, lasting relationships built through mentorship, adoption, or guardianship should consider how this influences relationship building between youth in foster care and adults.
- Mentorship: Mentorship is defined by the consistent presence of a volunteer adult in a foster teen's life, the definition used by YouthServe.
- Permanency: Permanency is defined by youth in foster care achieving their desired permanency goals, whether it be adoption, guardianship, or another long-term outcome desired by the youth.
- Local Context: Local context is defined by strategies within the permanency or mentorship program development that are responsive to the local foster support structures, statistics, funding streams, and needs of stakeholders within the foster care system.

- Youth Experience: Youth experience is defined by strategies within the permanency or mentorship program development that are responsive to youth experiences and input.
- Positive long-term foster youth outcomes: As noted, older youth in foster care are more likely to face poor outcomes, including lack of stable housing, poor mental and physical health, and higher rates of incarceration. This model is a framework to reduce these negative outcomes and increase positive outcomes.

07

Research Questions

YouthServe's approach has existed for several years, but the volume of adoption outcomes has been limited on an annual basis. The research questions below are based on the problem of practice, the conceptual framework, and the organization's logic model.

- What are the outcomes for older youth in foster care in the city in which the nonprofit is located, and how do YouthServe metrics compare?
- How do YouthServe stakeholders experience the organization's volunteer recruitment, mentor training, and program event activities?
- How do YouthServe stakeholders experience mentor matching and mentorship?
- How do YouthServe stakeholders perceive the organization's host weekend and adoption initiatives?

08

Project Design

To answer each question, several data sources were used. Each data source was used to inform one or more research question.

DATA COLLECTION

Three data sources were used, as shown below in Table 2: Data Collection Summary. The data sources ensured that the two elements from the conceptual framework, local context and youth voice and experience were embedded into the analysis. To analyze the first research question, data about the city's youth in foster care outcomes were contrasted with outcomes from the YouthServe metrics shared earlier. To inform the second, third, and fourth research questions, several YouthServe stakeholder interviews, including with board members, staff, volunteers, and youth associated with the organization, were conducted and coded. Additionally, interview informed findings were triangulated with the YouthServe metrics where applicable.

Table 2: *Data Collection Summary*

RESEARCH QUESTIONS		Interviews				Youth-Serve Trend Data	City Foster Youth Data
		Board	Staff	Youth	Volunteers		
01	**What are the outcomes of youth in foster care in the city in which the nonprofit is located, and how do YouthServe metrics compare?**	○	○	○	○	✓	✓
02	**How do YouthServe stakeholders experience the organization's volunteer recruitment, mentor training, and program event activities?**	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○
03	**How do YouthServe stakeholders experience mentor matching and mentorship?**	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○
04	**How do YouthServe stakeholders perceive the organization's host weekend and adoption initiatives?**	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	○

CITY FOSTER YOUTH DATA

YouthServe's host city child and family services agency made several data points publicly available to download in Microsoft Excel format. The specific agency name has been kept confidential and will be referenced here as Local Child and Family Services Agency. Three data files were downloaded from this Agency to analyze and compare against YouthServe metrics. These data files included the volume of youth at two points in time, year-end 2020, and mid-year 2021, and included: first, youth in care by age group; second, new entries into foster care by age group; and last, exits from foster care by both age and reason for exit.

YOUTHSERVE MULTI-YEAR METRICS

As previously mentioned, to inform organizational context, YouthServe provided several metrics summarizing their work from 2017 through mid-2021. These metrics included an overview of the volume of active volunteers, active youth supported by YouthServe, and of mentor, host, and adoption matches. The data were shared in a Microsoft Excel file used by the organization's program evaluation committee to understand the year over year impact of the organization's work.

The active volunteer data included several sub metrics, including volume of adults attending orientation and the volume of adults completing mentor training and all required clearances. The active youth data included several sub metrics, including volume of new youth referrals to the organization, volume of youth under age 21, and volume of youth who emancipated from the foster care system.

YOUTHSERVE STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

I conducted 23 interviews with YouthServe stakeholders. The interview questions were designed to understand the experiences of volunteer recruitment, training, and mentoring as well as perceptions of hosting and adoption, and on the individual stakeholder role (board member, staff, volunteer, of youth). Each interview was conducted on an entirely voluntary basis. Each participant consented to having the interview discussion recorded and was assured that the discussions were confidential. Specifically, they were assured that all analysis and reporting would remove individually identifiable information. Additionally, all insights and recommendations derived from interview analysis would be reported in aggregate form. The interviews, themselves, were semi-structured, with interview questions guiding the overall discussion. These guiding interview questions can be found in Appendices A-C.

At the direction of and introduction by the YouthServe Executive Director, I reached out to five board members (out of seven total board members at the time). The introductory email language is in Appendix D. These five were prioritized based on their tenure, as two of the board members were new to the organization. Of the five, two agreed to participate in an interview.

I conducted an interview with five staff members, which represents all staff associated with YouthServe at the time of my data gathering. While normally staffed at three fulltime members, one member left the organization after my interview, so I interviewed the new hire who replaced the resigned role. Additionally, towards the end of my data gathering interviews, YouthServe hired a fourth part-time individual, who I also interviewed. The Executive Director introduced me to each staff member. The introductory email language is in Appendix E.

The Executive Director invited fourteen YouthServe volunteers to participate in an interview with me, representing nearly half of the active volunteers at the time. Ultimately, seven agreed to speak with me, representing almost a fourth of active volunteers, including the roles of prospective mentor, mentor, host parent, and adoptive parent. Because the host and adoptive parenting volumes were limited, however, I aggregated much of their input into broad insights to both ensure confidentiality and to avoid biasing my adoption and host related findings due to small sample size. Additionally, the seven volunteers represented both new volunteers to YouthServe and those who have been committed to YouthServe for several years. The Executive Director introduced me to each volunteer. The introductory email language is in the Appendix F.

Last, the Executive Director invited eighteen youth supported by YouthServe to participate in an interview with me, of which nine participated. The introductory email language is in Appendix G. The Executive Director and I selected a high volume of youth, relative to volunteers, due to the importance of including youth voice in this engagement. Additionally, each participant was offered a $30 stipend for participating. Of note, in consultation with the Executive Director, I only spoke to youth who were age 18 and older. This was for two key reasons. First, informed consent was more achievable for this group, as those under age 18 would require approvals both from the youth, and from the city's family services agency. Ultimately, this may not have been achievable within this project's timeline. Second, nearly all youth I spoke with began their participation with YouthServe at a younger age and were able to speak to their experiences. Still, my findings may ultimately be biased towards insights from youth aged 18 and older. Several individuals had emancipated from the city's foster care system at age 21 while others remained in care. All identified as part of the YouthServe community.

The methodology associated with the data collection is summarized below in Table 3: Data Methodology.

Table 3: *Data Methodology*

DATA SOURCE	DATA METHODOLOGY	
City Foster Youth Data	✓ Youth in care by age group ✓ Exits from care by age and reason ✓ Six-month intervals: 2020 – mid 2021	✓ Publicly available in MS Excel through Local Child and Family Services Agency
YouthServe Multi-Year Metrics	✓ Active volunteer trend (orientation, training & clearance completion) ✓ Youth in program (pre/post emancipation; new referrals) ✓ Mentor, Host, and Adoption matches ✓ Multi-year (2017 – mid-2021)	✓ YouthServe provided metrics in MS Excel
YouthServe Stakeholder Interviews	✓ 23 interviews: Board members (2); Staff (5); Volunteers (7); Youth (9) ✓ Questions align to research questions and stakeholder (see appendices A-C)	✓ Oversampling of Youth ✓ Youth age 18+ ✓ Youth offered $30 stipend

09

Data Analysis and Findings

Using the three data sources, the data analysis informed each research question. Analysis for the first research question reviewed outcomes of teenage youth in foster care within YouthServe's host city to compare these findings to the YouthServe outcomes in the metrics provided. Analysis for the second, third, and fourth research questions used insights from the stakeholder interviews, and where applicable, triangulated data using the information from the YouthServe trend data, and the city foster youth data analysis.

RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

Research question one is: What are the outcomes for youth in foster care in the city in which the nonprofit is located, and how do YouthServe metrics compare?

DATA ANALYSIS

Three analyses were conducted for the first research question. First, the volume of youth ages 13 through 21 who were supported by the local foster care system in YouthServe's host city were compared to the

volume of youth in care supported by YouthServe. While the city was able to provide a breakdown between age 13 and 17, and those ages 18 and older, YouthServe metrics tracked only those who were still in foster care (or below age 21). Here, as shown in Table 4, the comparison shows that while the total number of older youth in care decreased by 4.8% (from 315 to 300) between 2020 and mid-2021 in the city, the youth supported by YouthServe remained constant at 18.

Table 4: *Currently Supported Youth by Age Group*

ADOPTION/GUARDIANSHIP BY AGE GROUP				
	2020		Q2 2021	
Age	**System***	**YouthServe****	**System***	**YouthServe****
13 - 17	189	18	175	18
18 +	126		125	

*Source: Local Child and Family Services Agency, 2021

**Source: YouthServe metrics

Second, the percentage of older youth in care who exited care through adoption or guardianship within the host city were compared to the percentage of youth engaged with YouthServe who exited care through adoption or guardianship. As shown in Table 5, approximately 9% and 8% of youth ages 13 through 21 exited care through adoption or guardianship in 2020 and mid-2021 respectively, compared to 11% and 6% of youth of the same age group who were supported by YouthServe.

Table 5: *Adoption / Guardianship by Age Group*

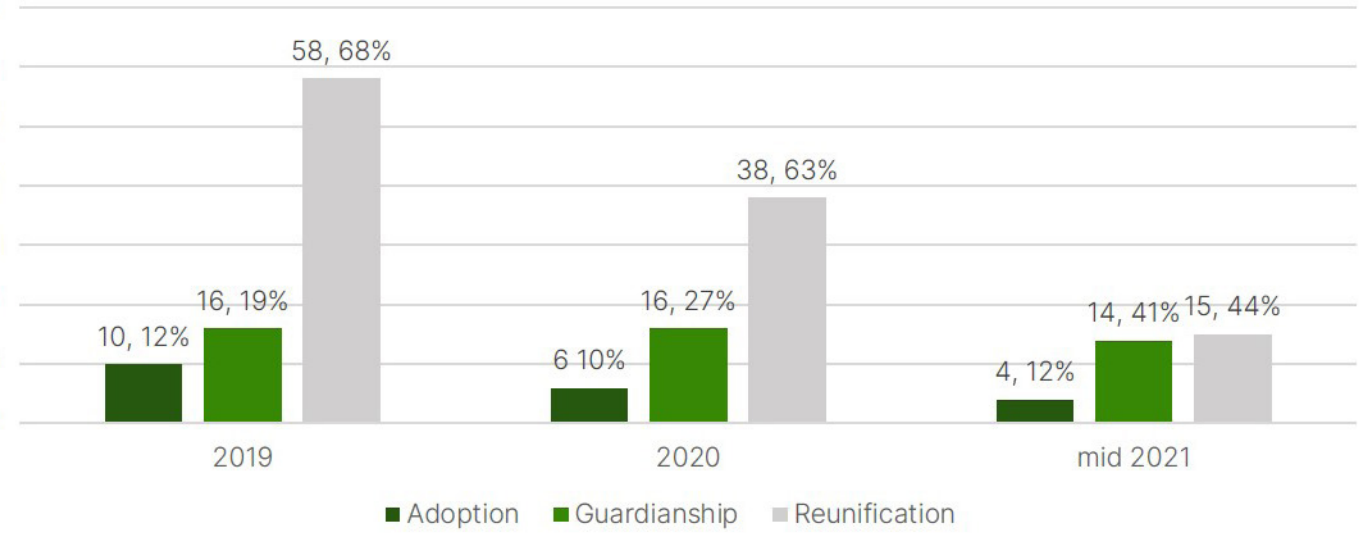
ADOPTION/GUARDIANSHIP BY AGE GROUP				
	2020		Q1-2 2021	
Age	**System***	**YouthServe****	**System***	**YouthServe****
13 - 17	22	2	18	1
18 +	6		7	
% 13-21 adopted	9%	11%	8%	6%

*Source: Local Child and Family Services Agency, 2021

**Source: YouthServe metrics

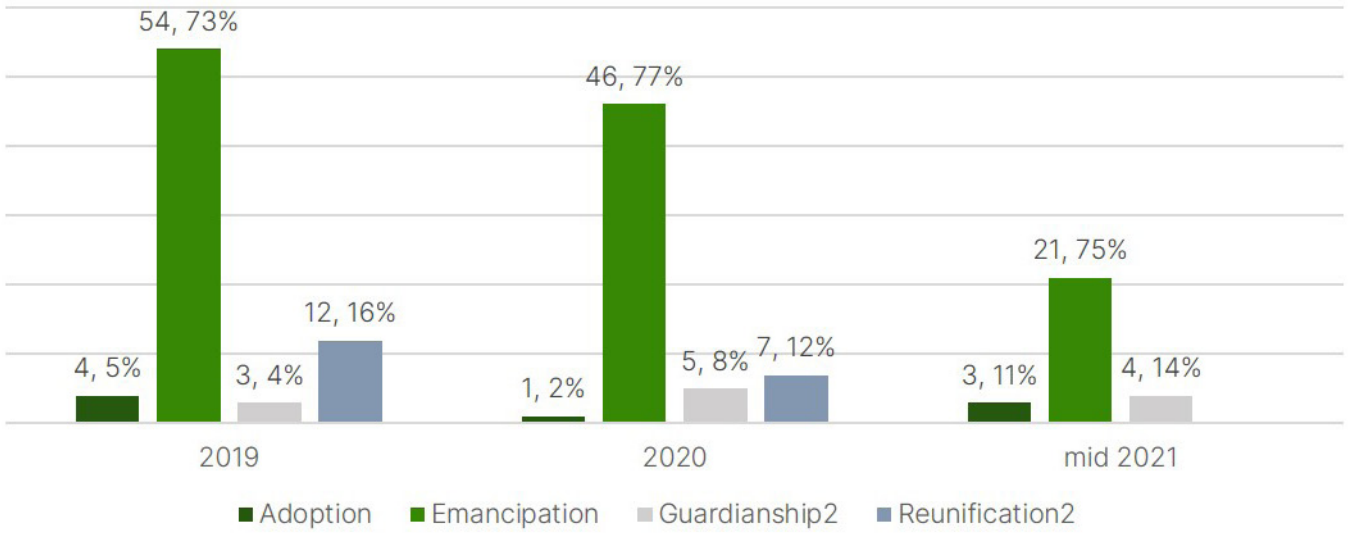
Last, while most youth between the ages of 13 and 21 ultimately exit care through emancipation, some older youth exited the local foster care system for other reasons in recent years. While YouthServe does not track exit from care reasons beyond adoption, the host city was able to provide this data for the overall group of older youth in foster care. As shown in Figures 3 and 4 below, while emancipation at age 21 is the most likely outcome, for youth who do exit care before age 18, guardianship and reunification represent the most frequent reasons for exiting care.

Figure 3: *Age 13 – 17 End of Care by Exit Reasons*



Data Source: Local Child and Family Services Agency, 2021

Figure 4: *Age 18+ End of Care by Exit Reasons*



Data Source: Local Child and Family Services Agency, 2021

FINDINGS

Three findings are offered for research question one, presented in Table 6, including the supported evidence derived from the analysis and, where applicable, the literature.

Table 6: *Research Question One Findings*

WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE IN THE CITY IN WHICH THE NONPROFIT IS LOCATED, AND HOW DO YOUTHSERVE METRICS COMPARE?	
Finding	**Evidence**
Adoption/Guardianship Outcomes YouthServe's adoption/guardianship outcomes mirror that of outcomes in the local foster care system.	➲ 8-9% of age 13-21 youth ended care via adoption or guardianship ➲ YouthServe outcomes ranged from 6-11%
Emancipation Emancipation is a likely outcome for teenage youth served both by the city foster care system and by YouthServe. Therefore, YouthServe plays an important role in providing support to emancipated youth.	➲ 3 of 4 youth age 18+ end care through emancipation ➲ Half of the youth served by YouthServe have emancipated
Reunification For the small percentage of city's teens age 13-18 who exit care, reunification is often as likely an outcome as guardianship.	➲ YouthServe is presently not focused on reunification outcome strategies ➲ For youth who leave care between 13-18 ▪ Reunification ranges from 44–68% ▪ Adoption/guardianship range from 31–53%

Finding One – Adoption/Guardianship Outcomes

The first finding is that YouthServe's adoption and guardianship outcomes generally mirror that of the local city foster care system. Therefore, while YouthServe has raised some concern that its adoption and guardianship-based focus is underperforming based on the limited volume of adoption and guardianship outcomes for the youth it serves, these outcomes do not underperform when compared to the broader context of older youth in foster care within YouthServe's host city.

As demonstrated in the analysis, from 2020 through mid-year 2021, approximately 8 – 9% of youth ages 13 through 21 left foster care due to adoption or guardianship; whereas approximately 6 – 11% of youth ages 13 through 21 served by YouthServe left care due to the same reasons. Importantly, the youth involved in YouthServe are a small sample of the youth who are part of the city's foster care system. As a result, first, a single adoption outcome will shift the YouthServe permanency outcome percentages widely. This is reflected in the 6 – 11% range in adoption and guardianship outcomes for YouthServe. Second, YouthServe adoption and guardianship outcomes mirror that of the city's outcomes, which suggests that YouthServe is not underperforming within its local context.

Finding Two – Emancipated Youth

The second finding is that YouthServe plays an important role in providing support to emancipated youth, because this is the most common outcome for teens in foster care. This finding is supported by several pieces of evidence. First, three in four youth that are age 18 or older within the city's foster care system ultimately emancipate from the system. Also, most youth age 13 or older do not exit foster care before turning 18, meaning their likely outcome is also emancipation. Second, half of the youth who participate with YouthServe are individuals who emancipated from foster care, suggesting YouthServe plays an important role to many older youth in care by continuing to serve them when the city's foster care system exits them through emancipation.

Finding Three – Reunification

The third finding is that for the small percentage of teens between the ages of 13 and 18 within the city's foster care system, reunification is just as likely an outcome, ranging from 44 – 68% of exit reasons, as guardianship, which ranges from 31 – 53%. In comparison, YouthServe presently has no program focus on reunification outcomes as it primarily focuses on program events, mentorship, host weekends, and adoption.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS TWO, THREE, AND FOUR

Research questions two, three, and four were heavily informed by the stakeholder interviews. Each interview lasted between thirty and ninety minutes. After coding and analyzing insights to derive findings for each research question, findings were triangulated, where applicable, with both the literature and YouthServe metrics.

DATA ANALYSIS

The primary data analysis that informed findings for research questions two, three, and four were those derived from the stakeholder interviews. Each of the stakeholder interviews was recorded and later transcribed. To analyze the insights, three sets of coding were used to ensure a holistic analysis. The first set of coding was based on the organization's logic model. This set of seven codes was later divided into sub-codes to enable a more granular analysis. A summary of coding and associated subcodes is in Table 7.

Table 7: *Logic Model Coding Summary*

LOGIC MODEL CODES	SUB CODE	DEFINITION	RESEARCH QUESTION
Recruitment	Youth Profile	Insights that inform how YouthServe sources new volunteers and youth, and how it might source, based on stakeholder experience	2
	Volunteer Profile		
	Volunteer Expectations		
Training	Driver Training	Insights that inform how training is effective, ineffective, missing, or could be modified	2
	Orientation		
	New/Other Training		
	Mentor Training		

Program Events	Type of Program	Insights that inform how events are effective, ineffective, missing, or could be modified	2
	Youth Experience		
	Volunteer Experience		
	Challenges		
MM: Mentor Matching	Youth Match Experience	Insights that inform how the mentor matching approach is effective, ineffective, missing, or could be modified	3
	Volunteer Match Experience		
	Challenges		
	Organic Match		
	Explicit Match		
Mentor-Mentee Experience	Mentor Impact	Insights that inform how the mentoring experience serves (or does not serve) youth in foster care and/or the volunteers	3
	Mentor Experience		
	Mentee Experience		
	Match Failures		
Host Experience	Host Adult Expectations	Insights that inform how the host parenting experience serves (or does not serve) youth in foster care and/or the volunteers	4
	Host Youth Experience		
	Host Adult Experience		
	Host Training/Background		
	Host Confusion		
Adoption / Guardianship	Adoption - Teen Lens	Insights that inform the volunteer and/or youth experience and thinking about adoption and/or guardianship	4
	Adoption - Volunteer Lens		
	Adoption Broad		

The second set of coding was developed using the conceptual framework and associated literature review. This set of four codes were connected to research questions two, three, and four. They are summarized below in Table 8.

Table 8: *Conceptual Framework Coding Summary*

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK REVIEW CODES	DEFINITION	RESEARCH QUESTION
Natural Mentoring	A sustained presence and availability of an adult who is not the youth's parent, but who is part of the youth's social network (Thompson et al., 2016)	2 – 4
Youth Experience	Youth experience and voice are necessary to define youth programs. This code flags insights about youth experience	2 – 4
Permanency	Permanency can be defined traditionally (guardianship, adoption) and broadly. This flag highlights permanency views among stakeholders	2 – 4
Local Context	Programmatic interventions that consider local context enhance likelihood of permanence. This code flags insights that inform local interventions	2 – 4

Lastly, through the interview transcription process, ten additional themes emerged that were not covered in the previous two coding sets. This resulted in a third set of coding, found in Table 9. Once this set of codes were developed, all interview data were re-coded against this new set of codes.

Table 9: *Emerging Theme Coding Summary*

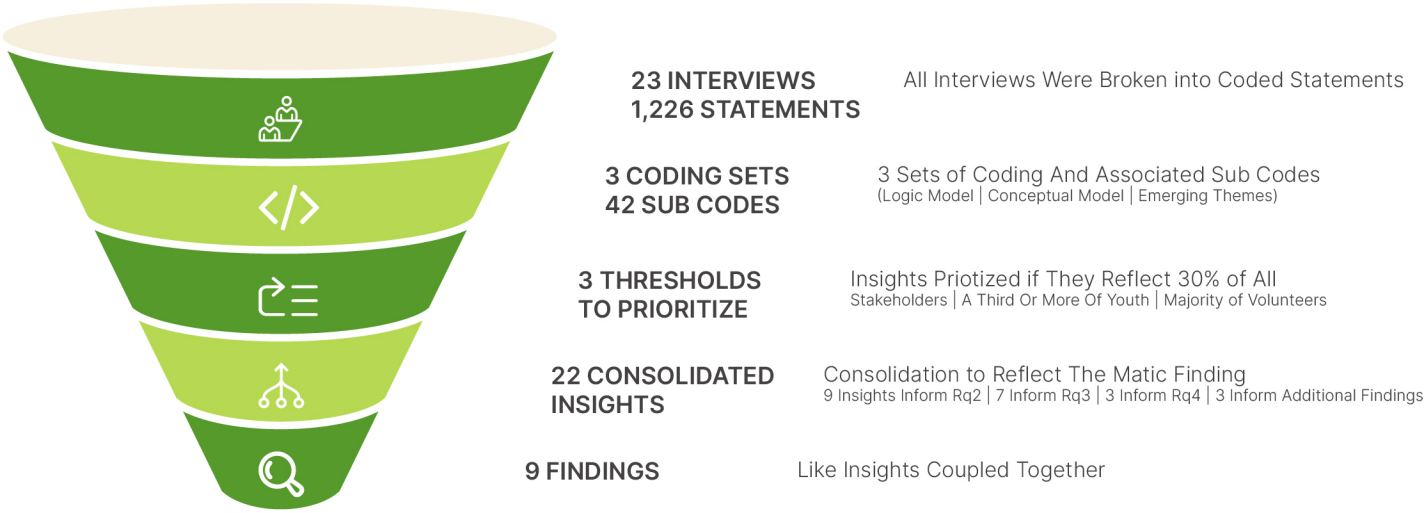
THEMATIC CODE	DEFINITION	RESEARCH QUESTION
Family	Stakeholder insights on what family means	2 – 4
Community	Views and experiences that stakeholders associate with community	2 – 4
Trust	Stakeholder insights on the concept of youth trust	2 – 4
Emancipation	Stakeholder insights on how emancipation influences youth experience	2 – 4
COVID	Stakeholder insights that inform COVID's impact	2 – 4
Organization	General statements about the organization's logic model	2 – 4
Volunteer Definition	Stakeholder insights on the volunteer definition	2 – 4
Executive Director	Stakeholder insights on Executive Director's influence	2 – 4
Trauma	Stakeholder insights on the concept of trauma	2 – 4
Housing	Stakeholder insights on the concept of housing	2 – 4

Through interview transcription and three sets of coding, ultimately, the 23 interviews resulted in 1,226 coded statements. To protect stakeholder confidentiality, and because only two board members participated, board and staff were combined into a single stakeholder group. Insights were prioritized as especially salient towards research question findings if they met one or more of three thresholds. Specifically, insights were prioritized if they reflected a shared insight from:

- 30% or more of all 23 stakeholders,
- a third or more of all youth, and/or
- the majority of volunteers.

Through this threshold prioritization process, 77 shared insights emerged, which were combined to reflect 22 thematic consolidated insights. These 22 consolidated insights informed eight findings that informed research questions two, three, and four, as well as one broad finding that informs the overall problem of practice. Figure 5 contains a summary of the interview analysis process.

Figure 5: *Interview Analysis Process*



FINDINGS – RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

Four findings are offered for research question two, presented in Table 10, including the supporting evidence derived from the analysis and, where applicable, the literature.

Table 10: *Research Question Two Findings*

HOW DO YOUTHSERVE STAKEHOLDERS EXPERIENCE THE ORGANIZATION'S VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT, MENTOR TRAINING, AND PROGRAM EVENT ACTIVITIES?	
Finding	**Evidence**
Recruitment Stakeholders describe the needs for adjustments to the current recruitment strategies.	➲ 43% of board/staff | 71% volunteers stated separate strategies were needed for adoptive parent versus mentor ➲ 43% of board/staff | 57% volunteers | 56% youth cited a need to consider youth experience when finding volunteers ➲ 78% of youth pointed to case managers or social workers as influential adults who connected them to YouthServe
Program Events Program events create a community for youth, both with adults and other youth. Often, the events nourish micro communities more than the 1:1 adult & young person interaction.	➲ 71% of volunteers | 67% youth spoke of micro communities ➲ 56% of youth pointed to the importance of connecting with young people in addition to adults through events ➲ 57% of volunteers | 100% of youth spoke of how different events aligned to needs of specific YouthServe groups, but events cannot meet needs of all

Mentor Training Trust and trauma are woven into the mentoring experience, and additional resources would be valued by youth and volunteers.	➲ 100% of volunteers cited need for trauma informed resources, community, or training to enhance ability to support youth ➲ 67% of youth | 43% of volunteers pointed to past broken commitments influencing youth in building relationships with volunteers. The relationships carry risk and require courage
Training and Event Need Emancipation creates unique challenges and requires different support for youth and mentors. This is important as YouthServe supports a higher percentage of youth who have emancipated.	➲ Half of the YouthServe youth emancipated (YouthServe metrics) ➲ 43% of board/staff | 29% of volunteers | 33% of youth point to the distinct needs of emancipated youth and their mentors

Finding One - Recruitment

The first finding is that YouthServe's current volunteer recruitment strategy might not yet be optimizing the possible avenues it could to solicit prospective mentors or adoptive parents. As active YouthServe volunteer volume decreases overtime, most volunteers and 43% of the staff and board acknowledged that the current volunteer pool thrived in building the YouthServe community but were not strong prospects to find potential adoptive parents. "The volunteer pool really is the community development pool, not a group focused on adoption," pointed out one YouthServe leader, highlighting the success YouthServe has had in maintaining committed volunteers but not volunteers who would consider adoption.

> The volunteer pool really is the community development pool, not a group focused on adoption.
>
> **BOARD/STAFF**

At the same time, most youth and volunteers, and 43% of the staff and board pointed to the benefits of recruiting volunteers based on an understanding of youth experience or needs. For example, suggestions such as identifying volunteers who already had experience living with youth in foster care (perhaps through childhood), who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+), who increasingly reflect the race of most of the youth, who have exposure to the city's foster care system, its court system, or with social workers, or who have volunteered with similar organizations in the past, were all viewed as helpful to equip volunteers with YouthServe. One YouthServe leader pointed to the need for more Black volunteers, suggesting YouthServe broaden its recruitment sources. "Most of the time that I speak to other Black men about volunteering and mentoring, there are two prominent places they're already doing that, and that's either through their church or their fraternity," the individual pointed out. Like this YouthServe leader, many stakeholders suggested that intentional efforts to find volunteers who reflect relevant experiences was important.

> Most of the time that I speak to other Black men about volunteering and mentoring, there are two prominent places they're already doing that, and that's either through their church or their fraternity.
>
> **BOARD/STAFF**

Last, while never suggesting social workers as a recruitment strategy, 78% of the youth pointed to the importance of their social worker in introducing them to YouthServe, citing that individual as an influential adult within their YouthServe experience. Youth frequently mentioned their social worker as important to ensuring that they gained access to the YouthServe community, pointing out that without that social worker, the YouthServe resource was not open to their peers within the foster care system. "A lot of social workers are probably aware of YouthServe, they just don't utilize it," remarked one youth. Because most youth pointed to social worker influence, this group may be a potential volunteer population to consider, as they have a strong understanding of the lived experience of youth in foster care.

> A lot of social workers are probably aware of YouthServe, they just don't utilize it.
>
> **YOUTH**

Finding Two - Events

The second finding is that program events create a community for youth, both with adults and with other youth. The events often nourish micro communities more than the individual one-on-one adult and youth interactions that is theorized to lead to mentor matching and host weekends. This finding triangulates several consistent sentiments across stakeholder groups.

While not a theme among board and staff, most volunteers and youth spoke of the benefits of distinct communities that exist within the broad YouthServe community. Within the broader YouthServe community attending events, these micro-communities were identified as those built among the youth, those built among volunteers, and even smaller groups of mentors and youth building their own group relationship. For example, one volunteer mentioned the importance of volunteer micro-communities, stating, "Having this network of adults is helpful. It's helpful for adults to have community too. When something's going on with your teen, it's not just all on you." Also, a youth pointed to an unstructured micro-community of several mentors and youth when they stated that, "Sometimes, we go on couples-mentee dates. You and your mentor and me and my mentor go out...to keep us all together."

> Having this network of adults is helpful. It's helpful for adults to have community too. When something's going on with your teen, it's not just all on you.
>
> VOLUNTEER

> Sometimes we go on couples-mentees dates. You and your mentor and me and my mentor go out... to keep us all together.
>
> YOUTH

In addition to the relationships built between adults and youth, most youth mentioned the distinct importance of connecting with other young people at YouthServe events. “I don’t know a lot of people who have been through the same thing that I have been through, who have been in the system, except through the program,” one youth expressed. For several, the events were an opportunity to engage with others with whom they shared experiences. These experiences ranged from the experience of foster care, or an ability to see siblings at events, to shared desire to participate in new activities that youth had not experienced before (for example, adventure parks, horse riding, and ziplining).

> I don’t know a lot of people who have been through the same thing that I have been through, who have been in the system except through the program.
>
> YOUTH

> “That’s the only way we [me and other youth] get to spend time together. I use that as my way to connect with them, see how they’re doing.
>
> YOUTH

Last, while the benefits of the smaller communities were well received by volunteers and youth alike, all young people and most volunteers acknowledged that events could not meet everyone’s needs. Some events were more beneficial to specific micro communities and less valuable to others. For example, several youth pointed to active events, such as an adventure park trip, as a beneficial shared experience between youth and less so adults. “Teenagers, we do everything. We try to be more active. Adults, they just scared to do stuff,” one youth asserted. Others mentioned events as an opportunity to spend time with a sibling more so than for adult connections. “That’s the only way we get to spend time together. I use that as my way to connect with them,” another Youth explained. Still, other stakeholders pointed to cooking-related events as particularly helpful for adult and youth interactions.

> Teenagers, we do everything. We try to be more active... Adults, they just scared to do stuff.
>
> YOUTH

> I noticed that the kids sometimes want to just see each other. So, they're grouping in the corner.
>
> VOLUNTEER

Finding Three – Mentor Training

A second thematic finding centered on a need cited by all volunteers and validated by youth. Trust and trauma are woven into the mentoring experience, and stakeholders believe additional resources would be valued by youth and volunteers to assist them in navigating this. Most youth expressed that past broken commitments did influence their engagement with mentors. "Be patient," one youth said about starting a new mentor relationship. "It honestly takes a while for that relationship to grow and open up. Even if we're difficult, don't give up," the youth advised volunteers. This was a similar sentiment from several youth. One youth asserted that, "A lot of us that are in the program have been hurt before by someone who we called a mentor," pointing to the challenge of trusting YouthServe volunteers. "It really does [take a lot of courage] ... Because foster kids, we can feel whether you're just in it for the money, whether you're in it for the reputation, or whether you're actually there for us."

> A lot of us that are in the program have been hurt before by someone who we called a mentor, so it takes time.
>
> YOUTH

> It really does [take a lot of courage to trust a mentor]. Your heart really must be in the right place. Because foster kids, we can feel whether you're just in it for the money, whether you're in it for the reputation, or whether you're actually there for us.
>
> YOUTH

All volunteers acknowledged a need for more trauma informed resources and understood that youth were cautious about how they approached relationship development with adults. "You can't base it on your experience of what it was like for you to be a teenager. And so that may be an aspect of the training that is missing," one volunteer suggested. Volunteers expressed a desire for continued training and other adults to speak with to equip them to best support the youth they worked with. "There is an aspect that I think you cannot teach in a classroom," one volunteer asserted. Another volunteer mentioned adults as a resource to help them, and stated, "It's really helpful to have people that have already had experiences with this population of youth and that understand some of the challenges."

Finding Four – Training and Event Need

As previously mentioned, all youth interviewed were age 18 or older, many of whom had already emancipated. Additionally, the local city's child and family services organization data showed emancipation as the most likely outcome for teenage youth in the foster care system. This informs the final finding, that emancipation creates unique challenges and requires different support for youth and mentors. As one mentor who supported a youth through emancipation asked, "Where are they going to live? How are they going to pay the bills? How are they going to get a checking account?" Volunteers emphasized a need for additional youth resources but also resources to help mentors best support youth as they transition.

> Where are they going to live? How are they going to pay the bills? How are they going to get a checking account?
>
> VOLUNTEER

> Ever since I aged out, that's the roughest part.
>
> YOUTH

The youth echoed this. "Ever since I aged out, that's the roughest part," one individual acknowledged, with several youth and volunteers suggesting that YouthServe could help through events and resources about housing, financial planning, and preparation for emancipation. The findings associated with research question two ultimately helped to inform the recommendations offered to YouthServe.

FINDINGS – RESEARCH QUESTION THREE

Findings for research question three are presented in Table 11, including the supporting evidence derived from the analysis and, where applicable, the literature.

Table 11: *Research Question Three Findings*

HOW DO YOUTHSERVE STAKEHOLDERS EXPERIENCE MENTOR MATCHING AND MENTORSHIP?	
Finding	**Evidence**
Mentor Matching Matching has challenges. Adults find building rapport difficult while youth prefer to connect with several adults because it's less risky and more beneficial.	➲ 57% of volunteers | 29% board/staff | 44% youth cite youth preference for organic versus adult preference for explicit match support ➲ 57% of volunteers|67% youth say adults feel inauthentic when matching ➲ 44% of youth questioned the limit of a single mentor per youth
Mentorship The mentor role is fluid and carries several identities that shift over time. Deep relationships that last over time are often associated with a supportive community surrounding them.	➲ 67% of youth point to mentor relationship change over time ➲ 71% of volunteers 44% youth|29% board/ staff cite role fluidity over time ➲ 67% of youth |43% board/staff |29% volunteers cited a community that supported relationships to enable it to last ➲ 71% of volunteers |57% board/staff |33% youth connect role fluidity with confusion for adults

Finding One – Mentor Matching

The first finding for the third research question is that matching with a mentor is challenging. Adults often find building rapport with youth to be difficult, while at the same time many youth prefer to connect with more than one adult because they find it less risky and more beneficial than focusing on a single adult match. These sentiments correlate well with the YouthServe metrics that generally show a low volume of new mentor-mentee matches each year. Additionally, the sentiments reflect three distinct insights.

First, while most volunteers preferred a more direct and formal mentor-matching process as opposed to the informal matching process of meeting youth at YouthServe events, almost half of the youth specifically voiced a preference for the low-pressure matching opportunities afforded at YouthServe events. "Being able to form non-traditional, organic relationships, that was like perfect. It allowed me to feel more comfortable, than to feel like I'm on display," one youth stated. Specifically, most volunteers pointed to the critical role of the Executive Director in reaching out, outside of the program event construct, to connect the adult with a specific youth as a potential mentee. Volunteers felt that without this direct intervention, matching at program events would not be feasible. At the same time, almost half of the youth acknowledged the safety and importance of events as a place to get to know adults without any perceived pressure.

> "Being able to form non-traditional, organic relationships, that was like perfect. It allowed me to feel more comfortable, than to feel like I'm on display.
>
> YOUTH

Second, most of the youth and volunteers affirmed the awkwardness and inauthenticity associated with new volunteers seeking to build a relationship with youth at YouthServe events to ultimately formalize a mentor and mentee relationship. Youth specifically felt that new volunteers did not seem equipped to engage with youth, pointing out that the adults looked "terrified," nervous, or even inauthentic. "If you're just there for one thing, I will see that and I don't want to work with you," one youth asserted. "Be confident in what you're doing. Don't be looking all scared and whimpering over there in the corner," another youth

suggested, when describing new volunteers at program events. Volunteers maintained that they felt awkward trying to engage with youth, fearing they might be perceived as "hovering," stating that "it's hard to know what to do or how to form these relationships." Another volunteer mentioned a draining feeling when trying to engage at program events. "I'm introverted in situations like these events... It was draining because it's hard to keep folks engaged. It was easier to gravitate towards the volunteers than connect with young folks," they explained.

> Be confident in what you're doing. Don't be looking all scared and whimpering over there in the corner.
>
> YOUTH

Last, almost half of the youth openly questioned the YouthServe model that required they only have a single adult mentor. Several contended that regardless of a formal mentor title, any committed adult within the YouthServe community meant that the adult could serve as helpful to them. Some explicitly pointed to robust relationships they had built with YouthServe volunteers who they felt were like mentors despite not carrying a mentor title. Several youth pointed to the benefits of having deep relationships with multiple YouthServe adults both to reduce risk of disappointment that a single volunteer might create, and to expand the different expertise and resources available to the youth through multiple committed adults. As one youth explained when describing their approach to building relationships with YouthServe adults, "I have it a little bit spread out. If this person disappoints me, I sort of expected that ... But if I got six people, I feel comfortable. I'm able to come out of my shell."

> I have it a little bit spread out. If this person disappoints me, I sort of expected that. I expect disappointment at some point. But if I got six people, I feel comfortable. I'm able to come out of my shell.
>
> YOUTH

Finding Two – Mentorship

While mentor matching can be a challenge, YouthServe has established several strong mentor and mentee relationships. The second finding informs this experience and shows that the mentor role, itself, is fluid. It carries several identities that shift over time, and those deep relationships that last are often associated with a supportive community that surrounds them. Several insights inform this finding.

First, most volunteers, nearly half of youth, and almost a third of the board and staff mentioned the fluidity of the mentor role requirements as the mentor and mentee relationship evolves over a period of years, while two thirds of youth pointed out how the relationship itself shifts over time based on the needs of the youth. According to one volunteer, "Our relationship evolved. I was a tutor. Sometimes I take on a parenting role. Sometimes, I'm more of a friend." Specifically, both volunteers and youth mentioned the needs shifting from initial trust building early on. "There were times my mentor gave me the right advice, but I didn't want to hear it, so I'd have to distance myself," one youth contended. The role often shifted from mentors carrying the role of "tutor," and "friend" for younger teenage youth, to evolving substantially as youth faced emancipation from the city's foster care system. "Ever since I aged out, that's the roughest part. Not finding a mentor when I'm in care, but after," one youth remarked.

> Our relationship evolved. I was a tutor. Sometimes I take on a parenting role. Sometimes, I'm more a friend.
>
> VOLUNTEER

Second, most volunteers, staff, board members and a third of youth associated the fluidity of the mentor role to also result in role confusion and challenges for mentors. "This would be appropriate if I was their parent. But I'm not. I don't know how to be dealing with this," one volunteer asserted. As the role changed, mentors often felt frustrated because they were not sure how to maintain their role in a way that met the needs of the youth. "It is so hard to build relationships. They're stop and start, a couple steps forward and ten steps back," one volunteer said when describing the evolving nature of mentoring. Despite the confusion associated with their roles, however, volunteers maintained long term relationships and voiced a deep commitment to navigate through the confusion.

> This would be appropriate if I was their parent. But I'm not. I don't know how to be dealing with this.
>
> VOLUNTEER

> Am I a friend? Mentor? Parent? Different things are differently appropriate based on different relationships. That's hard to navigate.
>
> VOLUNTEER

Last, as the relationship and the associated mentor role shifted, two thirds of youth, nearly half of the staff and board, and almost a third of volunteers affirmed the positive influence of the YouthServe community in helping to sustain the mentor and mentee relationship. "Having this network of adults is really helpful – to have this community," one volunteer affirmed. Referring to the community, one youth maintained, "I still have those same mentors in my life. I don't think you ever get too old for a mentor." Youth pointed to the community as having several adults who they could count on, beyond an individual mentor relationship, as helpful. Volunteers said that the relationships they had built with other YouthServe volunteers was an impactful resource for them in navigating the role challenges they felt.

> Having this network of adults is really helpful, to have this community.
>
> VOLUNTEER

> I still have those same mentors in my life. I don't think you ever get too old for a mentor.
>
> YOUTH

FINDINGS – RESEARCH QUESTION FOUR

Findings for research question four are presented in Table 12, including the supporting evidence derived from the analysis and, where applicable, the literature.

Table 12: *Research Question Four Findings*

HOW DO YOUTHSERVE STAKEHOLDERS PERCEIVE THE ORGANIZATION'S HOST WEEKEND AND ADOPTION INITIATIVES?	
Finding	**Evidence**
Host Confusion Volunteers voice confusion on the purpose of host parenting citing examples of why mentoring makes more sense for them than hosting.	➲ 57% of volunteers questioned the purpose of host parenting ➲ 57% of volunteers cite personal relationships, space, and/or not knowing youth well as reasons they consider mentoring but not hosting
Adoption YouthServe influenced adult views adoption, but many noted they did not plan to adopt.	➲ 100% of volunteers credit YouthServe for older youth adoption knowledge

Finding One – Host Confusion

YouthServe's current model holds that through deeper adult and youth relationships built through engagement at program events and through mentor and mentee relationships, some adults and youth may ultimately formalize a host parenting relationship as described previously. However, the stakeholder interview analysis led to the finding that volunteers voice confusion about the ultimate purpose of host parenting, with most volunteers mentioning that the role of mentor makes more sense than hosting. This finding was informed by two core insights.

First, most volunteers felt unsure about the ultimate purpose of host weekends. "Are they just coming here and using me like a hotel?" asked one volunteer, expressing their confusion. "If you're not looking to adoption, I feel like I'm teasing them," they added. The required clearances for host weekends mirrored those of foster and adoptive parents, including a commitment to training, background checks, and a home study. Several volunteers maintained that because adoption was not a focus for them, and because they did not feel confident as to what message hosting might send to youth, the benefits of such an initiative were not clear.

> Are they just coming here and using me like a hotel? If you're not looking to adoption, I feel like I'm teasing them.
>
> VOLUNTEER

Second, several volunteers contended that while their personal circumstances enabled them to commit fully to a role as a mentor, these circumstances did not translate to being equipped to host. "If you're going to have a child in your home, you're going to discuss it with the person you're with," explained one volunteer when describing why they were interested in mentorship but not adoption. The impediments to hosting included not having enough space in their homes, work and travel related commitments, and personal relationship status as reasons for why hosting did not make sense as a natural extension of mentoring.

Finding Two – Influencing Adoption View

Similar to YouthServe's host weekend offering, YouthServe theorizes that robust adult and youth relationships built through events and mentoring might ultimately lead to adoption outcomes. When discussing this topic with volunteers, a core finding emerged. All volunteers credited YouthServe with having a strong influence on their views of older youth adoption, acknowledging that their experiences as volunteers increased their understanding of what preparing for an adoptive parent role required. "I'm more empathetic and aware of children who are in the system, and the challenges they face," said one volunteer, attributing their empathy and awareness to their YouthServe experience.

> "I'm more empathetic and aware of children who are in the system and the challenges they face.
>
> VOLUNTEER

However, while one individual concluded that the experience increased their likelihood of adoption in the future, ("I see the possibility as more natural than just possible now"), several volunteers mentioned that their experience with YouthServe helped them to conclude that adoption, at least currently, was not an option. "Adoption with this population just seems impossible," one volunteer mentor asserted, while another volunteer who considered adoption early on maintained, "I started volunteering and we learned, no. That's the honest truth." Another volunteer added, "I knew adoption would be a big deal. But you don't know until you're in it, what the big deal means to you," pointing out that the YouthServe experience made them realize adoption might not be an option.

> I knew adoption would be a big deal. But you don't know until you're in it, what the big deal means to you.
>
> **VOLUNTEER**

Ultimately, most of the volunteers who concluded that adoption was not an option affirmed that they remained committed to the youth with whom they built relationships with on a long-term basis. Many maintained long-term mentorship roles, and two volunteers even described their evolving relationship with youth in familial terms such as uncle, aunt, or sibling.

FINDINGS – ADDITIONAL INSIGHT

Due to the high level of candor and resulting volume of insights derived in the interviews, one additional finding emerged through the coding and analysis process. It is provided in Table 13.

Table 13: *Additional Findings*

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS THAT INFORM THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE	
Finding	**Evidence**
The concepts of permanency and community are interwoven in the YouthServe experience for volunteers and youth, with all stakeholders citing the important of community to their YouthServe experience	➲ 78% of youth | 71% of board/staff | 57% of volunteers point to YouthServe's value as a consistent, long-term community ➲ 78% of youth | 29% of board/staff/ volunteers felt success for youth is confidence in long-term community (a net to catch them) ➲ 100% of youth | 71% of volunteers | 57% of board/staff point to the Executive Director as a lynchpin to the organization's identity as a permanent, committed community for youth

Finding One – Permanency & Community

As the topic of permanency was discussed in stakeholder interviews, the topic of community quickly emerged as woven into the YouthServe experience of permanence. "I feel like it's a family. Not just an organization," one youth acknowledged. This resulted in the finding that the concepts of permanency and community are interwoven in the YouthServe experience for both volunteers and youth, with three connected insights informing this finding.

> I feel like it's like a family. Not just an organization.
>
> YOUTH

> Not even just my mentor herself, or [the Executive Director] herself. I would say all of them. They all came together. More than once.
>
> YOUTH

First, the majority of stakeholders described YouthServe's ability to create a consistent and long-term community as one of the organization's core strengths in its ability to add value. Volunteers spoke to their commitment to remain connected to the community and youth long term, with one volunteer summarizing, "I'm pretty firmly entrenched in their lives as they are in mine," while youth referenced the community of adults that has maintained a permanent relationship for many years. "I aged out of foster care when I was 21, and they [YouthServe adults] have not left me yet," one youth expressed when describing the impact of YouthServe. The permanent community concept appears to be an intentional value offered by YouthServe, with most staff and board members echoing the importance of a sustainable community as important to the YouthServe model. As one YouthServe leader emphasized, "success looks like that young person who reaches out, and you know that there is a net to catch them."

> I aged out of foster care when I was 21, and they [YouthServe adults] have not left me yet.
>
> YOUTH

Further, nearly all youth cited long-term community as part of how they themselves describe success when thinking about YouthServe's support. While youth rarely used the terms permanent or permanency explicitly, when describing the value of YouthServe, nearly all spoke to the value they put on the YouthServe community. "To this day, I could still call people [at YouthServe] and still feel the same amount of concern, same amount of care," asserted one Youth. Beyond specific adult volunteer names, most youth cited the importance of YouthServe as a group they could rely on both prior to emancipation and well after entering adulthood. "There is a sense of stability, connections, resources, people who try to help," one youth remarked, followed by, "a sense of like, if something do happen, I could probably call somebody [at YouthServe]." Perhaps influenced by the age of the interviewed youth and because nearly half of the youth supported by YouthServe have emancipated, the youth unanimously acknowledged the importance of a reliable and permanent YouthServe community. As one youth eloquently put it, "I've really made lifelong connections. Not just temporary connections, but lifelong."

> To this day, I could still call people [at YouthServe] and still feel the same amount of concern, same amount of care.
>
> YOUTH

> I've really made lifelong connections. Not just temporary connections, but lifelong.
>
> YOUTH

Finally, all youth and most volunteers, board, and staff specifically cited YouthServe's Executive Director as a critical component, or a lynchpin, to the YouthServe's identity as a permanent, committed community for the youth it serves. Volunteers pointed to the Executive Director as a key role in connecting them both with other volunteers and with youth. "She is a huge support mechanism," asserted one volunteer, while another maintained, "I'm so impressed with how committed she is to the mission, and the amazing relationships she has built with YouthServe." Youth mentioned the Executive Director as the connection they relied on to reach the YouthServe community. "The [Executive Director] ended up working with me and working with some other adults that I already met in the past. That knew me. If it wasn't for them, you know, things would probably be a little different," remarked one Youth. Similarly, another youth pointed to the importance of the Executive Director in intentionally building the community. "The [Executive Director] always made like birthdays very important. We can't get everybody one by one, but we can do one good thing for everybody one time a year," they noted.

> [The Executive Director] always made like birthdays very important. We can't get everybody one by one, but we can do one good thing for everybody one time a year.
>
> YOUTH

> [The Executive Director] ended up working with me and working with some other adults that I already met in the past. That knew me. If it wasn't for them, you know, things would probably be a little different.

YOUTH

Limitations

The research question findings have some limitations. For example, when comparing youth outcomes between those served by YouthServe and those within its host city, the adoption and guardianship volume from YouthServe is low. As a result, a single increase or decrease in adoption on an annual basis for YouthServe would cause its rate of permanency, if measured by adoption and guardianship, to vary greatly as compared to the local foster youth statistics. Second, YouthServe metrics do not include reunification statistics explicitly. As a result, reunification statistics for the youth engaged in YouthServe programs cannot be compared with overall local data.

Additionally, the findings associated with the latter research questions are heavily informed by the interviews. As a result, these findings are biased towards a relatively small sample size, to experiences of youth over age 18, and to those individuals already associated with YouthServe. I did not interview stakeholders, whether prospective volunteers or youth in foster care, who were not engaged with YouthServe in some capacity. As a result, the interview-based findings carry certain limitations.

First, the finding that YouthServe could benefit from other volunteer recruitment strategy assumes that a pool of adoptive parent volunteers exists. This has not been validated in this research. Rather, it reflects input from current YouthServe stakeholders. I could only interview a very small volume of volunteers who experienced host weekends or adoption.

Second, and related, because very few volunteers and youth experienced host weekends or adoption in my interviews, my findings related to hosting and adoption were aggregated at a higher level. While the host parenting and adoption findings accurately reflect a large percentage of those interviewed, more nuanced findings on the experience of adoption and hosting are limited as a result.

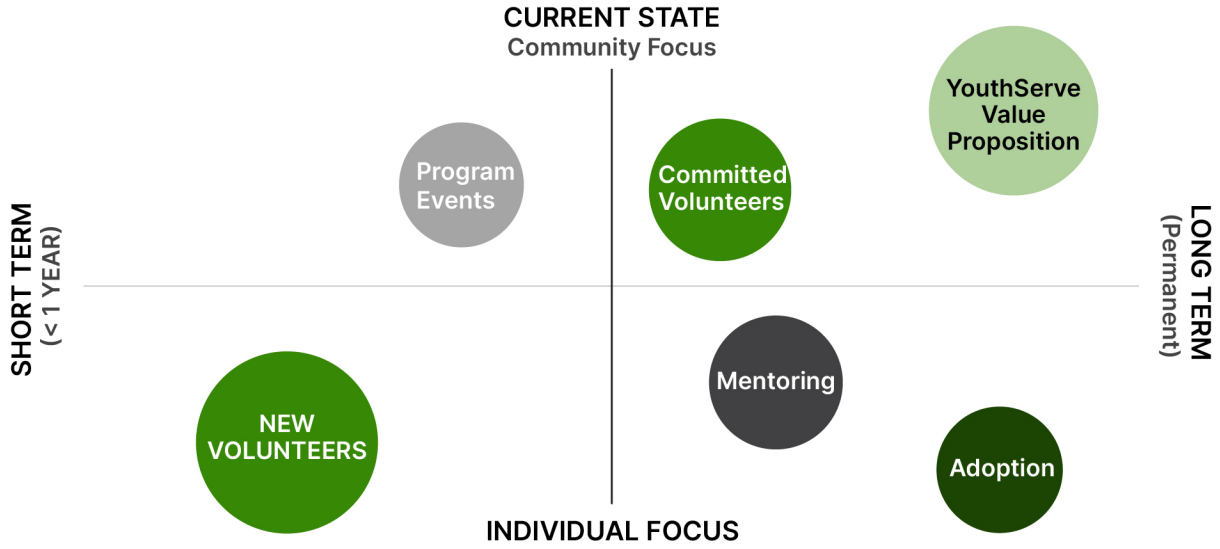
11

Recommendations / Interventions

Based on the findings, I offer six recommendations and an accompanying framework from which to execute the recommendations. The recommendations are structured along two dimensions, the first being timeframe (short-term versus long-term or permanent), and the second being a spectrum from engagement on an individual level to engagement at a community level. Marked along two axes (timeframe on the X-axis, and individual to community on the Y-axis), the structure is in Figure 6, the current state framework.

In Figure 6, the six elements associated with YouthServe are marked and offer the basis for the recommendations that follow. The placements are based on the findings from this capstone research, and include the YouthServe value proposition (placed as high on community focus and duration), committed volunteers (moderately high on community focus, moderately high on duration), program events (moderately high community focus, moderately low duration), new volunteers (more individual focus and short term duration), mentoring (moderately high duration and more individual focus), and adoption (permanent duration and individual focus).

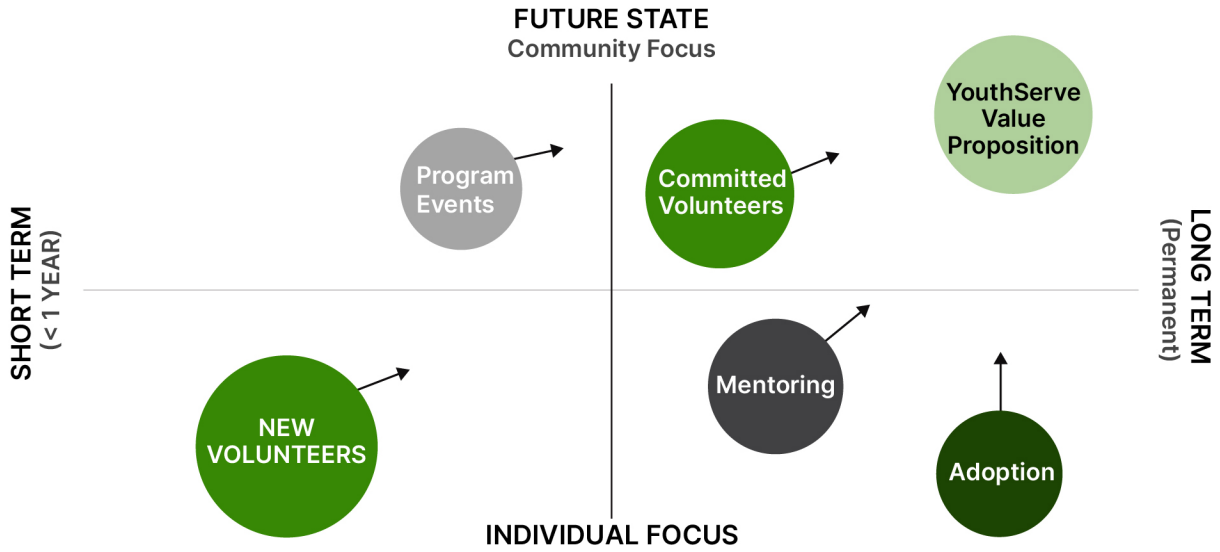
Figure 6: *Current State Framework*



The recommendations that follow will first point to findings that support why the YouthServe element is placed where it is, and second, offer recommendations to evolve the element based on the findings. Ultimately, the recommendations will move each element in the direction noted in Figure 7, the future state framework.

Specifically, in Figure 7, the YouthServe value proposition remains high on both community focus and permanent duration. Each additional element will have recommendations that support the movement of the element closer towards both a community focus, and a long term, or permanent duration, based on the research findings presented earlier.

Figure 7: *Future State Framework*



RECOMMENDATION ONE: YOUTHSERVE VALUE PROPOSITION

YouthServe already embraces its role in creating a community of caring adults for local youth in foster care. The value YouthServe provides as a reliable and long-term community that serves youth was evident throughout the stakeholder interviews. While described in quite a few ways across interviews and stakeholder groups, 100% of the 23 stakeholders interviewed spoke to how important community was to their YouthServe experience. Nearly all youth, board, and staff members defined it as a consistent, long-term community, and most youth defined YouthServe success as an ability to count on the YouthServe community. Additionally, all youth, most volunteers, and most staff and board members interviewed pointed to the YouthServe Executive Director as the lynchpin to the permanent community built by YouthServe.

The recommendation made here is for YouthServe to align more formally its program focus areas directly to this value proposition. Specifically, the recommendation is to align its volunteer engagements, program events, mentoring, host weekends, and adoption initiatives towards a long-term and community-based focus. The following recommendations offer specific suggestions on how to achieve this, based on the research conducted.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: NEW VOLUNTEER
(INCREASE COMMUNITY FOCUS)

The analysis and findings suggest that stakeholders describe a need for adjustments to the current recruitment strategies. For example, the volume of active volunteers is decreasing over time and new mentor-matching pairs are limited, suggesting that for some volunteers, engagement with YouthServe is more short-term in nature and less immersed in the YouthServe community. While program events have created a community experience for those who attend, new volunteers have not always been sure of their role in authentically connecting with youth. Yet, both volunteers and youth point to the importance and challenges of having adults remain present and consistent over time to build trust and community.

The recommendation is for YouthServe to broaden the new volunteer orientation expectations built for new volunteers. Currently, stakeholders describe the orientation as an overview of YouthServe and of the roles a new volunteer can play, which includes optional event attendance, formal mentoring, host parenting or adoption. While these roles can remain, a broader role of committed community member should be offered. This role will be more deeply described in recommendation five. Overall, it encourages new volunteers who might not wish to carry the role of mentor, host parent or adoptive parent to commit to becoming a present community member. This differs from the current optional event attendance role and encourages new adults to commit to building relationships with YouthServe adults and youth in a manner that is less one-on-one relationship building and more community-identity based.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: PROGRAM EVENTS
(NOURISH MICRO-COMMUNITIES LONG-TERM)

The primary research finding about program events were that they succeed in creating a community, though often the events nourish micro-communities within the broader YouthServe umbrella. While well received, however, most volunteers and all youth pointed to how the current events cannot meet the needs of everyone. For example, some events nourish youth engagement with other youth, while others more enable new adult interactions with youth. Other events enable volunteers to connect with other adult volunteers to provide support and community around the shared experience of being in a mentor role.

The recommendation here is to tailor more events to intentionally support micro-communities. I offer the following examples of events tailored to micro-communities based on the interviews and findings.

- Emancipation: Several stakeholders pointed to the unique needs of youth facing emancipation, and nearly half of the youth supported by YouthServe faced emancipation to date. Mentors supporting these individuals have further voiced a need for additional support. Emancipation focused events might focus on financial planning, housing assistance strategies, and the exploration of the changing role and needs of mentors to best support youth.
- Youth Community: Several youth pointed to the relationships they have with other young people engaged with YouthServe. Influenced by both shared experiences in foster care and by a desire to engage in new experiences together (rock climbing, zip lining, adventure parks were all cited in the research), these events have been well received by many young people but were less well received by volunteers, as the community connection was largely among youth themselves. This suggests an opportunity to intentionally create events designed for the youth-specific micro-community.
- Experienced Mentor Community: Several volunteers voiced the challenges associated with being a mentor and valued having a supportive community that included other volunteer adults. The ability to share experiences and advice and to be among adult community members who share the same commitment to YouthServe was cited as a value-add to attending program events. This suggests an opportunity exists to create events that nourish this experienced volunteer micro-community.
- Adult and Youth Micro-Communities: Several volunteers noted deep relationships with multiple youth, beyond the traditional 1:1 mentor-mentee relationship. Conversely, almost half of the youth questioned the value of having solely one committed adult as a mentor. Additionally, several youth and volunteers pointed to feeling connected as a group of youth and adults, with volunteers voicing an openness to hosting events for smaller adult and youth micro-communities. This suggests an opportunity to engage more explicitly these micro-communities as part of the YouthServe focus.
- Trauma Informed Community Events: Sitting at the intersection of training and micro-community event, this event would serve as both continued education and experience sharing opportunities for volunteer adults. All volunteers cited a need for continued resources, support, and learning on the topic of remaining trauma informed in their role, largely to build trust and deepen relationships with youth. Most youth validated this sentiment, voicing the challenges they face in building relationships with volunteers due to broken commitments in the past. This recommendation, therefore, is to host a micro-community event dedicated to sharing experiences and growing as trauma informed volunteers.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR: MENTORING
(ENABLE GROWTH FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COMMUNITY)

As mentioned in the findings, mentors find their role with YouthServe both fluid and challenging, while at the same time, youth voiced a desire to have multiple adult mentors. Still, YouthServe metrics confirms that established mentor and mentee relationships last for several years, though the volume of new mentor and mentee matches is limited each year. For youth, having several adults to rely on feels for some less risky and more beneficial. For adults, some volunteers felt having other adults as part of their micro-community to be helpful in their ability to meet the dynamic needs of youth, while others pointed to having deep relationships with several youth, agnostic of whether a formal mentee title was permitted.

The recommendation is to expand the mentorship concept beyond the current individual mentor and mentee relationship. The expansion would add additional mentor and mentee relationship options, while maintaining the current YouthServe model of enabling volunteer adults and youth to make the decision on mentorship that best fits their needs and desires. The expanded options are as follows, and each is correlated with the program event recommendation of adult and youth micro-communities, because each expanded option enables a new micro-community to flourish.

- Several adults committed to mentoring an individual youth: This added mentorship option would enable more than one adult to mentor a single youth, if youth desire this arrangement. This directly addresses the desire several youths raised about not having limits to a single mentor, while also formalizing what are often informal youth and adult relationships that exist.
- Single volunteer adult committed to mentoring several young people within a micro-community: This added mentorship option would enable several youths to work with a single adult mentor, if youth desire this arrangement. This option recognizes the valuable peer relationships youth have built with others within young people within the YouthServe community, while connecting these relationships with that of an adult mentor.
- Expanding pool from which to identify mentors to include existing adults within a youth's community: The literature pointed to the beneficial impacts of engaging non-parental adults who exist within the youth's community as potential natural mentors (Thompson et al., 2016). While this was not a theme within the stakeholder interviews, 78% of youth interviewed pointed to the importance of their social worker in connecting them to YouthServe, and other studies showed that the vast majority of emancipated youth remained connected to their foster or group home parent (Barth, 1990). Additionally, host city data points to nearly half of the youth who exit care between 13 and

18 exiting for reunification reasons as opposed to adoption, suggesting engagement within the youth's community of adults is important. The potential to engage caring adults within a youth's life as members of the YouthServe mentorship community could be explored further.

These options would require updates to the mentorship training program to adequately prepare prospective volunteers. If, and as, updates are made, youth voice and experience should inform the structure of the revised training curriculum.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE: COMMITTED VOLUNTEERS
(GROW TO COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS)

The research shows that the volunteer role is often confusing or unclear, despite many volunteers maintaining a desire to be part of the YouthServe work. Several volunteers who are not currently mentors pointed to feeling unclear as to what value they could contribute, while many volunteers mentioned taking on roles beyond the traditional mentor, host, or adoptive parent role. For example, some volunteers tailored their own program events, others hosted youth outside of the traditional protocol, and others expressed a desire to contribute but struggled to know how.

Related to recommendation two, this recommendation is to formalize the role of a committed community volunteer. This formalized role responds to a core youth sentiment expressed in the interviews that beyond individual names of mentors, volunteers, or the Executive Director, "They (the community) are there for me." The role would be defined by the following attributes:

- Long-term commitment (like mentorship requirements) as opposed to ad hoc attendance and participation.
- Participation is visible and consistent, demonstrated by event attendance, relevant skills-based support to the YouthServe community, and/or participation in micro-communities.
- Tailored contributions can be built through skills-based volunteerism. Examples include resume reviews, creating program events, digital community building, local housing strategy development, or deeper engagement within the city's foster care ecosystem.
- Community based role as opposed to solely individual adult and youth or adult and adult volunteerism, this strategy entails adopting a community identity.

Establishing this role affords clarity to the volunteer experience, while benefitting the entire YouthServe community through an increased presence of consistent committed adults.

RECOMMENDATION SIX: ADOPTION

(MAINTAIN STRENGTHS AND EMBED VALUE PROPOSITION)

The final recommendation is about the YouthServe adoption focus. As mentioned in the findings, YouthServe has had limited success based on the volume of adoption and host weekend matches, though when compared to adoption and guardianship rates within the broader city context, YouthServe's rates are comparable. While several stakeholders recommended a separate volunteer recruitment strategy for prospective adoptive parents, the literature suggests likelihood of adoption for this age group is low. Due to the small sample size of volunteers who could speak to host weekend or adoption experiences, findings were limited.

Despite the research limitations, one recommendation is to increasingly align the YouthServe adoption focus to its broad value proposition of permanent, long-term community for youth in foster care. The recommendation is to broaden the value that YouthServe offers under its adoption-focused offerings. Specifically, YouthServe could continue its support to prospective adoptive parents while enhancing offerings to include that when adoption or guardianship outcomes occur, an entire YouthServe committed community exists to support and surround the new family. This could mean expanding the YouthServe community offering to all local adoptive families that include older youth adoption and enabling micro-communities for adoptive or prospective adoptive adults.

This recommendation has limitations in that developing the micro-community can and should be informed by stakeholders with lived experience, and the volume of adoptions are small. Additionally, operationalizing the micro-communities would require research beyond the scope of this engagement. However, bridging the individual nature of adult and youth adoption to offerings that capitalize on the YouthServe community should be explored. All stakeholders value this community as a core value offered by YouthServe.

12

Discussion

YouthServe ultimately hopes that its work helps to reduce some of the negative outcomes that often face older youth in care. However, the YouthServe problem of practice, focused on increasing permanency rates for older youth in foster care, has no simple answer. At a national level, adoption rates for older youth in care are low, and the most likely outcome is emancipation, which risks leaving youth outside of the system of support offered through foster care but with no defined community of adults to support them as they face young adulthood.

With no simple answers to address this, I focused on understanding the experiences of YouthServe stakeholders, and the local context of the city in which the organization was located. Ultimately, the findings pointed out that while YouthServe did not increase adoption and guardianship rates for the older youth it served, their outcome metrics by these measures were also no worse. Also, the findings suggested a core strength of the organization.

Specifically, YouthServe defines its role as creating a community of caring adults that surround the young people it serves. The stakeholders I spoke with, including a disproportionate representation of youth who participated with the organization, validated that YouthServe was successful in providing this community value. Additionally, volunteers and youth suggested that the organization and its community could benefit from an even more explicit permanent community-based identity.

These findings do not negate the positive benefits offered by adoption and permanency. Rather, they are consistent with the nationwide view that successful adoption outcomes for older youth in care are difficult to achieve. The conceptual framework built from the literature review point to the importance of inviting local context and youth voice into how organizations build programmatic strategies to enhance positive outcomes for older youth in care. This study suggests that YouthServe's work is aligned with the conceptual framework for several reasons.

First, it operates purely within its local city context. The city context points to older youth in care ultimately aging out of care, and YouthServe continues to support this age group. YouthServe also benefits from long term volunteers who are actively engaged within the community. Second, YouthServe invites youth voice and experience by enabling youth to actively choose which adult volunteers they wish to connect with. Interestingly though, many youth pointed to a desire to have several formal mentors through YouthServe.

Third, the youth I spoke with all affirmed the positive influence YouthServe has had. Across many unique examples, broadly the youth pointed to the consistency and dependability of the YouthServe community. While adoption outcomes have been limited, the young people I spoke with generally pointed to how positively YouthServe has been as they faced early adulthood. YouthServe could not necessarily negate the negative outcomes or challenges faced by the youth it supported, but the youth consistently spoke to how important YouthServe was to help them face these challenges.

13

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14

Appendices

Appendix A

Guiding Questions for Board & Staff

ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL

- Tell me about yourself.
- Who do you live with?
- What does family mean to you?
- What relationship, if any, do you have to the foster care system?
- What relationship, if any, do you have to foster care in general?
- What experience did you have with host parenting, guardianship, or adoption prior to joining YouthServe?

ABOUT RECRUITMENT STRATEGY AND TRAINING

- What do you look for in prospective YouthServe volunteers? Why?
- What challenges has YouthServe faced in identifying volunteers?
- What challenges has YouthServe faced in retaining volunteers?
- What has changed in your recruitment strategy over the last 10 years? Why?
- What would you change about your volunteer strategy if you could?
- What are the biggest barriers in identifying volunteers? What drives this?
- Tell me about the volunteer training.
- How was the training developed?

- What does success look like from the training?
- What is the most important take-away from the training?
- What are the biggest barriers to a successful training session?
- How does training ultimately influence volunteer mentor-matching?
- How does training ultimately influence adoption and guardianship outcomes?
- Tell me about the YouthServe program events.
- What do you hope the events will achieve?
- What does success look like for each event? How do you know?
- What are the biggest barriers to a successful program event?
- How do program events ultimately influence volunteer mentor-matching?
- How do program events ultimately influence adoption and guardianship outcomes?

ABOUT MENTORSHIP, ADOPTION, GUARDIANSHIP

- In the past 5 years, what have you observed as trends with respect to mentor-matching? Why?
- What have you learned from youth feedback?
- What have you learned from volunteer feedback?
- In the past 5 years, what have you observed as trends with respect to post weekends? Why?
- What have you learned from youth feedback?
- What have you learned from volunteer feedback?
- In the past 5 years, what have you observed as trends with respect to adoption and/or guardianship outcomes? Why?
- What have you learned from youth feedback?
- What have you learned from volunteer feedback?

Appendix B

Guiding Questions for Volunteers

ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL

- Tell me about yourself. [age | race | occupation]
- Who do you live with?
- What does family mean to you?
- What relationship, if any, do you have to the foster care system?
- What relationship, if any, do you have to foster care in general?
- What experience did you have with host parenting, guardianship, or adoption prior to joining YouthServe?

ABOUT BECOMING A VOLUNTEER

- How did you learn about YouthServe?
- What motivated you to volunteer with YouthServe?
- Who is the first person you spoke with at YouthServe?
- When did you begin volunteering? What does being a volunteer mean to you?
- What has YouthServe participation looked like for you?
- Tell me about your experience with YouthServe program events.
- How many have you attended?
- What were the most effective events? Most enjoyable? Why?

- Tell me about the training you received. What surprised you? What was helpful? What would you add? Change?
- What did you learn from training that you still refer back to?
- What gaps have you found between training and your volunteer experience?
- What do you hope to contribute to the YouthServe mission?
- What do you hope to receive from volunteering?
- What challenges have you faced as a volunteer?
- Tell me about your experience becoming matched with a mentee.

ABOUT MENTORSHIP, ADOPTION, GUARDIANSHIP

- What experience did you have with foster care youth prior to YouthServe?
- What experience did you have with mentorship prior to YouthServe?
- Tell me about your perception of YouthServe mentorship.
- Tell me about your relationship with your mentee [if applicable].
- What surprised you?
- What does not surprise you?
- How might your mentee define permanency? How does your view align or differ?
- What does “host weekend” mean to you?
- What, if anything, would need to be true for you to consider a host weekend with an YouthServe youth?
- What, if anything, would need to be true for you to consider adopting or becoming a permanent guardian for an older youth?
- Has YouthServe influenced or shifted your thinking concerning youth adoption or guardianship? How?

Appendix C

Guiding Questions for Youth

ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL

- Tell me about yourself.
- How did you learn about YouthServe?
- Tell me about your experience with YouthServe.
- How long have you been part of the YouthServe community?
- What is the best part about YouthServe? Why?
- What would you change about YouthServe if you could? Why?
- YouthServe connects youth in foster care with community and caring adults. What does community mean for you? Caring adult?

ABOUT THE EVENTS

- What YouthServe events have you attended?
- Which were your favorite? Why?
- Which were NOT your favorite? Why?

ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIPS

- If someone comes to mind, tell me about the best relationship you have had with an adult. What was valuable?

- Who have you met from YouthServe? Tell me about them.
- How did you meet them?

[If they mention mentorship]

  - What does having a mentor mean to you?
  - (If applicable) What do you look for in a mentor?
  - (If applicable) How does mentor-matching work at YouthServe? What do you like about it? What would you change?
  - (If applicable) How did you meet your mentor? What do you do with your mentor? What have you learned? How has your relationship changed over time?

IF APPLICABLE: PERMANENCY

[If they mention host weekends or adoption]

- Tell me about your [host / adoption / guardianship] experience.
- What surprised you?
- What excited you?
- What would you change if you could?

HOPES

- What are you hopes for the future? The next few years?
- How does YouthServe support you in your hopes?
- How could YouthServe support you even more?

Appendix D

Introductory Email and Invitation to YouthServe Board

To: [Board Members]

Cc: [Executive Director]

From: Angie Wilen

Subject: YouthServe Volunteer / Student – Request for your time

Good afternoon board members,

I am a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University, where I am required to complete a culminating project to support a partner organization understand a particular issues or challenge that is important to the organization.

I am grateful that YouthServe agreed to be my partner organization, specifically to explore the YouthServe **challenge of increasing rates of permanency (guardianship, adoption) for the youth it serves, in addition to the mentorship volunteer rates.**

As part of my research, I am requesting time to speak with each of you (as some of the more tenured YouthServe board members) to learn about your ideas, insights, and experiences as it will inform my analysis and ultimately the recommendations I will share back to the Executive Director and the board. Specifically, I'm hoping you'll each be willing to speak with me for about 30-45 minutes or so. (Note: I will aggregate all insights, and as a result, your individual name / input will be kept confidential when I put together my analysis).

I'll follow up with you directly in a separate email (to avoid too much email traffic in your inbox). Thank you in advance for considering and potentially speaking with me. Look forward to chatting.

Angie

Appendix E

Introductory Email and Invitation to YouthServe Staff

To: [Staff Member]

CC: [Executive Director]

From: Angie Wilen

Subject: Request for your time - YouthServe experience

[Staff Member Name],

I'm writing to both introduce myself and request some of your time.

I am part of a doctoral program at Vanderbilt University. The Executive Director (copied) and the board were kind enough to allow me to partner with YouthServe my final project associated with my degree.

The project is to better understand the experience of YouthServe volunteers, teens, staff, and board in order to provide recommendations on how we can strengthen our impact and help more teens in care develop permanent and long-term adult relationships.

My ask: would you be willing to (virtually) share your thoughts (a 30-45 minute discussion) with me? I would welcome your thoughts and experiences as it will help inform the work of this project.

If you decide to participate, your insights will be anonymized along with the insights of others.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in a discussion about your YouthServe experience.

Angie

Appendix F

Introductory Email and Invitation to YouthServe Volunteers

To: [Blank]

CC: Angie Wilen

BCC: Volunteer

From: YouthServe Executive Director

Subject: Will you help us strengthen our outcomes?

[Insert Name],

As part of her doctoral program at Vanderbilt University, YouthServe mentor Angie Wilen is undertaking a thesis project to better understand the experience of YouthServe volunteers, teens, staff, and board in order to provide recommendations on how we can strengthen our impact and help more teens in care develop permanent and long-term adult relationships.

Angie is hoping to talk to a cross-section of volunteers – new and long-term and who have connected with youth in various roles.

My ask: would you be willing to (virtually) share your thoughts (a 30–45-minute discussion) with Angie? If so, please respond to me (or to Angie, who is copied on this email). If so, Angie will follow up with you directly to schedule.

If you decide to participate, your insights will be aggregated and anonymized.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in a discussion about your YouthServe experience.

And thank you as always for all you do for YouthServe and YouthServe teens,

Executive Director

Appendix G

Introductory Email and Invitation to YouthServe Youth

To: [Blank]

CC: Angie Wilen

BCC: Youth

From: YouthServe Executive Director

Subject: Will you help YouthServe get stronger?

[Insert Name],

Angie Wilen is a graduate student at Vanderbilt University. She is doing a project to help us get better at recruiting the right kind of volunteers – meaning adults with whom teens can form strong and supportive relationships.

Angie is specifically hoping to understand how YouthServe can offer as much support as possible to the young people we serve. So, the most important perspective for her to hear is from young people like you who have participated with us.

I have copied Angie on this email. If you are open to sharing your YouthServe experience and ideas with her, you can reply via email (or let me know). Angie would then set up a time for you and her to talk. She expects the conversation might be 30 to 45 minutes. There is a small stipend as a thank you to you for participating.

Anything you share (your experience, ideas, suggestions) with her is confidential. Angie will only be sharing themes and ideas back with me and the YouthServe board, not any names of who said what.

Thank you for considering. Let me know if you have any questions,

Executive Director