A formative evaluation of a coach-based technical assistance model for youth- and family-focused programming☆

Jonathan R. Olson[a,*], Kimberly J. McCarthy[b], Daniel F. Perkins[b], Lynne M. Borden[c]

[a] Public Health Program, Bastyr University, 14500 Juanita Drive, Kenmore, WA 98028, United States
[b] Penn State Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness, The Pennsylvania State University, 311 South Allen Street, Suite 002, State College, PA 16801, United States
[c] College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, Room 290D McNH, 1985 Buford Avenue, St Paul, MN 55108, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Background: The Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk (CYFAR) initiative provides funding and technical support for local community-based programs designed to promote positive outcomes among vulnerable populations. In 2013, CYFAR implemented significant changes in the way it provides technical assistance (TA) to grantees. These changes included introducing a new TA model in which trained coaches provide proactive support that is tailored to individual CYFAR projects. The purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution of this TA model and present preliminary findings from a formative evaluation.
Methods: CYFAR Principal Investigators (PIs) were invited to respond to online surveys in 2015 and 2016. The surveys were designed to assess PI attitudes towards the nature and quality of support that they receive from their coaches.
Results: CYFAR PIs reported that their coaches have incorporated a range of coaching skills and techniques into their work. PIs have generally positive attitudes towards their coaches, and these attitudes have become more positive over time.
Conclusions: Results suggest that CYFAR PIs have been generally supportive of the new TA system. Factors that may have facilitated support include a strong emphasis on team-building and the provision of specific resources that support program design, implementation, and evaluation.

1. A formative evaluation of a coach-based technical assistance model

The purpose of this article is to describe the design, implementation, and preliminary formative evaluation of a coaching model designed to deliver technical assistance to recipients of Sustainable Community Projects grants from the Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk (CYFAR) initiative. CYFAR was created in 1991 by the United States Department of Agriculture – Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (USDA-CSREES) with the purpose of funding and supporting community-based projects that promote positive developmental outcomes among vulnerable children, youth, and families. Since its inception, CYFAR has funded more than 600 projects that have been based in every state and territory of the United States (Marek, Byrne, Marczak, Betts, & Mancini, 1999; http://nifa.usda.gov/program/children-youth-and-families-risk-cyfar-grant-program). In accordance with grant guidelines, CYFAR programs must be administered through

land-grant universities or tribal colleges. In practice, most programs have been administered by university Cooperative Extension units, which are part of the land grant system.

Throughout its history, CYFAR administrators from the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA-NIFA) have provided general support to funded projects through a combination of professional development and other forms of technical assistance. Until 2013, support came from Liaisons who served as intermediaries between USDA-NIFA administrators and grant recipients. These professionals helped facilitate communication between grant administrators and grantees through a combination of telephone meetings, site visits, and written reports. In 2013, CYFAR underwent a significant revision of its technical assistance model as it shifted towards using seven trained coaches to provide support and assistance to CYFAR grantees (Olson, Hawkey, Smith, Perkins, & Borden, 2016; Olson, Smith, Hawkey, Perkins, Borden, 2016). The primary motive behind this shift was to implement a comprehensive and centralized system of technical

assistance that encompasses implementation supports, evaluation tools, professional development, and individually tailored coaching for each CYFAR grantee with the goal of helping grant recipients incorporate components of evidence-informed practice into their work. In this paper, we provide an overview of the major components of the enhanced technical assistance system within CYFAR, and report the results of a preliminary formative evaluation in which we examined factors related to the acceptance of the new CYFAR coaching model that informed process refinements.

1.1. Promoting evidence-Informed practice within CYFAR

Since its inception, the primary purpose of the CYFAR initiative has been to promote the development and delivery of high-quality educational programs designed to meet the basic needs of youth and families considered to be at risk for various negative outcomes. Common across all funded programs is a goal of promoting strengths among program participants that help support physical, behavioral, and emotional health and well-being. CYFAR was designed to be consistent with the basic tenets of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), and as such, grantees have always been encouraged to use or develop research-based programs that intervene at multiple ecological levels such that they typically focus on the individual, family, and larger community context. Targeted outcomes vary widely across grantees. Example outcomes include childhood overweight and obesity, youth substance use, academic performance, positive parenting, and many other related topics.

Throughout its history, CYFAR has included technical assistance designed to support grantees as they develop, adapt, and implement programs designed to promote a myriad of positive outcomes. As noted above, the majority of CYFAR projects have been administered through Cooperative Extension systems, which have state and regional offices in every state and territory in the United States. Given the strong ties between local Extension units and the communities they serve, a major strength of this avenue of program delivery has been grantees' abilities to respond to the unique local contexts in which individual CYFAR projects are delivered (Olson, Hawkey et al., 2016; Olson, Smith et al., 2016). Thus, during the early years of CYFAR programming, technical assistance efforts focused largely on supporting grantees who tailored community-based programs to meet local needs.

Over the past two decades, the growth of evidence-informed programming and practices has transformed the design and delivery of community-based youth- and family-focused programming. Indeed, since the early 1990s, the field of prevention science has undergone a dramatic transformation resulting in a significant emphasis on assessing the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs, and building lessons learned from evaluations into new manualized curricula (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Greenberg & Lippold, 2013; Olson, 2010). Funding for many youth-focused programs became tied to selecting and implementing strategies with a strong theoretical foundation and evidence of effectiveness (Weiss, Murphy-Graham, Petrosino, & Gandhi, 2008). Such events posed a unique challenge for many land grant universities' Cooperative Extension Services in that their emphasis on responsiveness to local community need was challenged by new calls for implementing, with fidelity, established curricula with strong evidence of success in experimental trials.

In light of these transformations in the field of youth and family programming, the CYFAR technical assistance system was completely redesigned in 2013 to help support CYFAR grantees as they increase their emphasis on evidence-informed programming and practices. A major component of this redesign was the establishment of the CYFAR Professional Development and Technical Assistance (PDTA) Center. As its name implies, the PDTA Center has been tasked with providing professional development opportunities and technical support to CYFAR grantees, with the goal of enabling grantees to design,

implement, and evaluate high-quality strategies aimed at promoting positive outcomes among children, youth, and families. Since its inception, the PDTA Center has focused on helping grantees incorporate evidence-informed practices. Specifically, the Center has encouraged grantees to base programming decisions on existing empirical literature, collect baseline data on community needs, and collect pre- and post-test data on programming outcomes with the goal of incorporating lessons learned into program refinements. The Center also encourages grantees to focus on high quality program implementation as a way to improve outcomes. The Center has employed a variety of strategies to support grantees in these endeavors. For example, the PDTA Center organizes an annual professional development event that provides mandatory training for all current CYFAR grantees. The Center also holds monthly webinars, sends regular updates to grantees, coordinates required grant reports, and has developed and maintained an online system to support the collection, processing, and dissemination of process and outcome evaluation data.

In addition to the above-mentioned components, the PDTA Center has designed and implemented a coaching model as a mechanism through which to help grantees incorporate evidence-informed principles into their work. In recent years, a growing body of literature has demonstrated that intensive technical support can encourage acceptance of evidence-informed practice and promote high quality implementation of such initiatives (Becker, Bradshaw, Domitrovich, & Ialongo, 2013; Becker, Darney, Domitrovich, Keperling, & Ialongo, 2013; Chilenski et al., 2014; Chilenski et al., 2016; Chilenski, Olson, Schulte, Perkins, & Spoth, 2015; Wandersman, Chien, & Katz, 2012). To be effective, the proactive implementation support needs to be regular and consistent, thereby resulting in an embedded continuous quality improvement process (Langley et al., 2009). Within CYFAR, the PDTA Center specifically sought to use an intensive coaching approach to help grantees accept the new emphasis on evidence-informed practice within CYFAR, while still maintaining some freedom to tailor interventions to meet specific local needs. Since transitioning to this new model, the PDTA Center has created implementation and evaluation tools for grantees and has trained seven CYFAR PDTA coaches to use the coaching strategies outlined in the following paragraphs. These efforts have been undertaken with intentionality to move grantees towards making data-informed decisions when selecting and developing programs. CYFAR coaches also help grantees use basic evaluation methods to assess program outcomes, consider evaluation results to refine program implementation as a part of a continuous quality improvement process, and seek out and secure sustainability resources.

1.2. Specific CYFAR coaching strategies

Specific coaching strategies used within CYFAR were drawn from the literature on peer coaching, which includes a combination of mentoring, technical assistance, guidance, reflection, problem-solving, and team-building (Allen, 2013; Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Olson, Hawkey et al., 2016; Olson, Smith et al., 2016). A defining characteristic of the CYFAR coaching model is an ongoing empowering relationship that emphasizes regular contact between the coach and members of each CYFAR grantee's programming team. CYFAR PDTA Center coaches use a combination of telephone and in-person meetings to establish relationships based on mutual respect, open communication, and trust. Grantees are encouraged to actively participate in knowledge and skill-building and the purpose of regular coaching contact is to help facilitate the learning process. Grantees do not answer directly to their CYFAR coaches. Although coaches provide reminders and support as grantees navigate through grant requirements, grantees are ultimately responsible to the funding agency, not to the PTDA team, for financial and outcomes reports. As such, coaches do not manage or police specific grantee behaviors (Bluckert, 2005; Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Kutilek & Earnest, 2001), but rather provide support, encouragement, and access to resources developed by the PDTA. In