The VOICE Project: Building the Social Supports of Formerly Homeless Youth

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Agenda

1. Background Information & Importance of Youth Voice
2. Overview of The VOICE Project
3. What is Design-Thinking?
4. Design-Thinking Activity
5. Discussion
6. Review Key Points
7. Questions

Background Information

- Humans have a fundamental need to belong (Baumesiter & Leary, 1995)

- Not surprisingly, the desire to belong extends to individuals experiencing homelessness as well

- Individuals experiencing homelessness report feeling socially isolated (Watson & Kane, 2016) & those who lack strong social networks are at an increased risk of homelessness (e.g., Shelton, Taylor, Bonner, & van den Bree, 2009)

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Importance of Youth Voice

- What is youth voice?
- Potential benefits of youth-adult partnerships for youth
  - Empowerment & improved self-esteem
  - Re-evaluation of biases
  - Social connections that can lead to professional opportunities
- Potential benefits of youth-adult partnerships for organizations
  - Understanding of the needs of youth
  - Creation of more effective programs
  - Challenging negative stereotypes

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Overview of The VOICE Project

- LifeWorks implemented a new initiative (The VOICE Project) to help recently housed youth build positive support networks and integrate with the broader community

- To ensure that youth's needs are adequately understood and addressed, our project leverages participatory action research methods and design-thinking techniques

- How can you elevate youth voice? Develop programs alongside youth!

The VOICE Project

- Led by youth with lived experience of homelessness
- **Overarching Goal** = address the sense of social disconnection and lack of community integration reported by youth transitioning from homelessness to housing
- Design community-facing opportunities for social engagement

VOICE Successes Thus Far

Timeline of VOICE progress

- February 2019
  - Three youth joined as "core members"
- March 2019
  - Literature review of comparable projects completed
- April 2019
  - Youth finalize vision for the project & complete observational research

- May – August 2019
  - 17 interviews & focus groups with staff completed
  - 11 interviews, focus groups, & design-thinking activities with youth completed
- September 2019
  - Synthesis of findings completed
- October 2019 +
  - Planning & execution of activities

Community Activities

Based on the themes that emerged from our needs assessment, we created events surrounding the interests of newly housed youth:

- Songwriting workshop
- Yoga class
- Dinner outings
- Movie nights (in person & virtual)
- Gaming events (in person & virtual)
- Book club (virtual)

- Pet show (virtual)
- Make up tips & tricks (virtual)
- Juneteenth celebration (virtual)
- Survival guide (virtual)
- Arts & crafts (virtual)
- Pumpkin carving
- BBQ

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Evaluation of The VOICE Project

- Youth leaders have been involved in collecting data, interpreting results, and synthesizing findings

- Evaluation includes:
  - Pre/post-surveys
    - Support network strength
    - Life skills
    - Resiliency
    - Access to community
    - Participation in community activities
  - Focus groups with activity participants

Preliminary Findings

- Importance of "hanging out" and sharing a meal for social connection

- Initial results highlight the connection between social networks and resiliency

Challenges & Key Learnings

- Building strong partner relationships
- Helping social connection flourish
- Having multiple adult partners
- Adapting to change
- Providing ample time & space
- Promoting professional development
- Balancing youth ownership and accountability

How can you implement a project similar to VOICE at your organization?

What is design thinking?

A brief history.

Key principles

- Every problem can be solved
- The problem does not have to be perfectly articulated prior to working toward a solution
- The people facing the problem are the ones who hold the "key" to solving the problem
- It's okay to not know the answer as you are working toward a solution
- Use non-verbal, graphical ways of generating ideas

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Trust the process

- Three primary stages:
  1. Inspiration
     - In this phase, you'll learn how to better understand people (e.g., you'll observe their lives, hear their hopes and desires, and get smart on your challenge)
  2. Ideation
     - Here you'll make sense of everything you've heard, generate tons of ideas, identify opportunities for design, and refine your solutions
  3. Implementation
     - Now is your chance to bring your solution to life!
- You will regularly "diverge" and "converge" as you move through the process (i.e., rapidly moving from the concrete to the abstract)

Frame your challenge

- What do you know already?
- Why is this important to you?
- Frame the challenge
  - Focus on a need (not a functional benefit)
  - Adjust the scope (not too broad, not too tight)
  - Frame it as a goal
- Ask yourself:
  - Have you baked a solution into your problem statement? (Hint: don't!)
  - Is your question generative and inspiring?
  - Have you narrowed your audience?
  - Have you chosen a specific part of the journey to design for?
  - Have you drawn on insights or inspiration to make your question juicy and interesting?

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Let's practice!

Frame your challenge

What is the problem you're trying to solve?

Help youth who are transitioning from homelessness to housing create community and develop positive social connections, with the ultimate goal of increasing housing stability.

Frame your challenge as a design question:

How might we help youth who are transitioning from homelessness to housing create community and develop positive social connections to, ultimately, increase housing stability?

What are some constraints we might face?

Funding restrictions, "time crunch", lack of cross-agency awareness, low recruitment, generating enough buy-in from community, transportation to and from social events, access to technology, COVID limitations

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What are some possible solutions to this challenge?

Discussion

What are some ways you can bring these skills and techniques into your day-to-day work in order to strengthen youth voice?

Key Points

- Building supportive social networks and creating community are two important steps for housing stability

- Elevating youth voice in a meaningful way offers many benefits to youth, staff, and organizations

- Design-thinking is a helpful technique to utilize when gathering feedback from youth and learning about their perspective

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Questions?

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