

Improving Adolescent & Young Adult Health: Challenges and Opportunities Emerging from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has forced rapid adaptations across the public health and health care sectors, including systems that serve adolescents and young adults (AYAs). The Adolescent and Young Adult Health National Resource Center aims to improve systems of care for AYAs by supporting State Title V MCH Programs and their clinical partners, through a focus on the preventive visit, with emphasis on behavioral and mental health. In October 2020, the Center convened its advisory board of leaders in key public health and health care organizations and agencies, as well as parent and youth participants.

Based on experiences and recommendations shared by our experts, this document highlights successful adaptations to the pandemic and offers recommendations to advance AYA health during and after the pandemic. Recurring themes include innovative technology use, partnerships and equity.

Successes

Advisory Board members emphasized the importance of partnerships in identifying successful adaptations and “lessons learned” from the pandemic, including:

- Organizations providing guidance on high school and college reopening, including approaches to address inequity and disparities in higher education.
- Community Cultural Leader Advisory Boards to access underserved and marginalized communities.
- National “Listening & Learning” sessions to inform service delivery modifications for school-based health centers during the pandemic.
- COVID-response workgroups that improve outreach to AYAs to increase vaccination coverage.
- Linking schools, childcare providers, and community centers to produce screeners for COVID-19 symptoms and social determinants of health.
- Developing new models for care, such as combining telehealth and in-person visits, providing vaccinations in a clinic parking lot, or sharing Wi-Fi with AYAs at clinics and school campuses.

Opportunities for Improving Systems of Care

Advisory board members offered a range of strategies to advance AYA systems of care in the COVID-19 era. These strategies emphasized our core foci of preventive services and behavioral and mental health, as well as broad efforts to improve systems of care.

Well-Visit and Preventive Services

- Engage AYAs as stakeholders to identify their perceptions of the well visit to inform more effective outreach strategies, including appropriate messaging for both AYAs and their parents/guardians. Consider rebranding the well visit using more accessible terms, such as “check-up”.
- Coordinate outreach tools via social media to offer information on telemedicine and clinic safety practices, address concerns over in-person visits during COVID-19, correct misinformation, and promote the value of the well visit, among other services.
- Advocate using schools as an alternative site where telemedicine visits can occur, ensuring internet connectivity and the opportunity to provide a more confidential environment in which AYAs can communicate with health care providers.
- Develop a coordinated system of care that integrates existing primary care sites, as well as concurrent systems where young people already receive care, such as reproductive health and urgent care centers, within telemedicine networks.
- Develop protocols for equitable COVID-19 vaccine education, training, distribution, administration, and follow-up for AYAs.

Behavioral & Mental Health

- Encourage young adult community leaders to speak out on the importance of behavioral and mental health care, engage in peer coaching/mentoring opportunities, and build upon existing behavioral and mental health models for young adults.
- Increase the capacity of primary care providers to deliver AYA behavioral and mental health services, encompassing both screening and treatment.
- Leverage the relationship between community mental health providers and school-based counselors to increase adolescents' receipt of services.
- Engage and train relatable community members, and those who have routine interactions with AYAs, to identify those requiring mental health services. Build community capacity to refer and link AYAs to services.

Systems of Care

- Engage cultural and community leaders to conduct outreach to marginalized AYA populations to connect them to the health care system.
- Young adults make up a large proportion of the racial equity and social justice movements; consider ways to mobilize their passion to inform public health.
- Engage young adults to advocate to policymakers for better transition care, the development of emergency care plans, and a stronger understanding of young adult health needs.
- Improve connections between public health and primary care professionals, through "primary care - public health integration" work groups to develop a shared agenda based on population level health care and health outcome data to identify areas for improvement.
- Improve the ways that federal and state Title V agencies include under-represented AYA populations in outreach materials.
- Incorporate a specific lens on improving AYA health in federal Title V block grant reviews.
- Conduct research to document best practices for incorporating telemedicine into service delivery models, including how telemedicine reaches different AYA populations; confidentiality of care; and outcomes. Examine technology's role in reducing barriers to care and increasing opportunities to reach underserved populations.

Conclusion

The pandemic has caused extended disruptions in many areas—such as education, social networks and health care—that support AYAs as they navigate the transition to adulthood. Collectively, these disruptions have contributed to increased mental and emotional health problems among AYAs. Furthermore, the pandemic has highlighted longstanding inequities that lead to worse health outcomes and access to care for many AYA populations.

The pandemic has also led to innovations and new approaches to service delivery, such as those described here, that can help improve systems of care for AYAs. These innovations and approaches reveal opportunities for improving systems of care in areas such as telemedicine and integration of health care with public health, education and other systems. As efforts to build on these opportunities evolve, it is critical to advance equity while directly engaging youth, their families, and communities.

For resources related to adolescents and young adults and the pandemic, please visit our COVID-19 page at <https://nahic.ucsf.edu/covid-19-home/>. Visit our Center's website for resources on the well visit, depression screening and young adult health at <https://nahic.ucsf.edu/resource-center/>.

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