



## 100-DAY CHALLENGE CASE STUDIES

# ITHACA/TOMPKINS COUNTY, NY: CIRCLES OF SUPPORT FOR YOUTH

**Ithaca/Tompkins County worked throughout the 100-Day Challenge to create new resources and generate local support for a youth sponsor/advocate pilot program that will create circles of support for youth.**

### HOW ITHACA/TOMPKINS COUNTY MADE IT HAPPEN

Ithaca/Tompkins County established circles of support for youth on the community's by-name list as an area of focus for its 100-Day Challenge. The "circles of support" model will help ensure that the comprehensive needs of youth are met – including housing, health, education, employment, and social-emotional well-being – and that youth are supported in navigating various systems to meet those needs. The Ithaca/Tompkins County 100-Day Challenge Team envisions each youth identifying an individual – preferably someone with whom they already have a connection such as a mentor, teacher, friend or family member – who can serve as their advocate and walk with them through their journey towards housing stability as they access housing and other resources.

The Ithaca/Tompkins County 100-Day Challenge Team developed a service plan template to be used by youth sponsors and advocates in creating circles of support for youth reflective of their individualized goals and needs. The Team then met with youth with lived experience at the local library and other locations that serve as safe spaces for youth to share the service plan template and request their feedback on its design and planned use. Members of the 100-Day Challenge Team also worked to strengthen their connections with each other, including overcoming data sharing challenges and improving coordination to better serve youth clients with multiple needs.

Ithaca/Tompkins County has laid the groundwork for creating circles of support for youth and plans to launch a Youth Sponsor Pilot Program with youth from the by-name list as part of the community's continued work to prevent and end homelessness following the 100-Day Challenge.

### Key Takeaways:

- Youth experiencing homelessness often have multiple needs such as housing, education and employment.
- A youth sponsor or advocate is an innovative model for supporting youth in accessing the comprehensive resources they need. A sponsor/advocate walks with youth through their entire journey of accessing housing and resources and supports them in navigating multiple systems of care.
- A sponsor/advocate can be someone with whom the youth has an existing positive and supportive relationship, such as a friend, teacher, or mentor. They can also be an individual from within the homeless response system such as a case manager.
- Youth with lived experience should be involved in supportive service program development to ensure it reflects their needs, experiences, and youth choice.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### **1) Involve Youth with Lived Experience as Partners in Program Design and Feedback**

Youth voice and choice were central to the development of the youth circles of support model in Ithaca/Tompkins County. The 100-Day Challenge Team met youth where they were, including the local library and other safe spaces where youth congregate, to consult with them on the initial design and planned use of the service plan template. Their feedback has been incorporated into the plan template, which has been designed to reflect the principle of youth choice by empowering youth (with the support of their sponsors) to define their own needs and a pathway to accomplishing their goals. The 100-Day Challenge Team also identified the need for a coalition of youth with lived experience to help design and launch the Youth Sponsor Pilot Program. As part of its ongoing efforts following the 100-Day Challenge, Ithaca/Tompkins County is also working to develop a Youth Peer Advocate position to provide peer-based mentorship to youth experiencing homelessness.

### **2) Build a Strong Foundation for Providing Comprehensive Supports to Youth**

Ithaca/Tompkins County utilized the 100-Day Challenge as an opportunity to build a strong foundation to meet the comprehensive needs of youth. The Team developed a clear concept for the circles of support model that includes a youth sponsor/advocate role; a service plan for use by sponsors/advocates to capture youth needs and goals; and enriched partnerships with housing and service providers to quickly respond to youth needs. During the 100-Day Challenge, Ithaca/Tompkins County developed a service plan template, consulted youth with lived experience for their feedback, and established new and strong housing and service partnerships in support of the circles of support model. This work will be expanded upon through the launch of the community's Youth Sponsor Pilot Program.

### **3) Don't Become Discouraged by Minor Setbacks and Challenges**

The Ithaca/Tompkins County 100-Day Challenge Team encountered a number of unexpected setbacks and challenges, but remained persistent in its dedication to establishing circles of support for youth. During the 100-Day Challenge, Ithaca/Tompkins County realized that necessary information sharing processes and protocols were not in place for all Team members, inhibiting their ability to conduct outreach to youth on the by-name list and help them identify sponsors/advocates. Ithaca/Tompkins County worked to get releases of information in place for all Team members, which will allow all Team members to conduct outreach to youth on the by-name list and will result in improved communication and service coordination moving forward. Ithaca/Tompkins County also determined that it could not move forward with work on the Youth Sponsor Pilot Program until youth Planning Body members could be included and properly compensated for their time. The Ithaca/Tompkins County 100-Day Challenge Team has leveraged these challenges and setbacks as opportunities to improve its work and the plan to develop circles of support for youth.

### **4) Consider Implementation Through a Pilot Program**

Ithaca/Tompkins County decided to develop a pilot program to introduce the "circles of support" model to clients at a small scale before expanding to all youth on the by-name list. The Youth Sponsor Pilot Program will allow the 100-Day Challenge Team to evaluate the model in action, including the effectiveness of youth sponsors from inside the homeless response system (such as case managers) versus outside the system (such as family and mentors). Feedback from youth and their sponsors/advocates during the pilot will help shape the future of the program, ensuring that the program is as effective and responsive to youth needs as possible before a larger rollout.