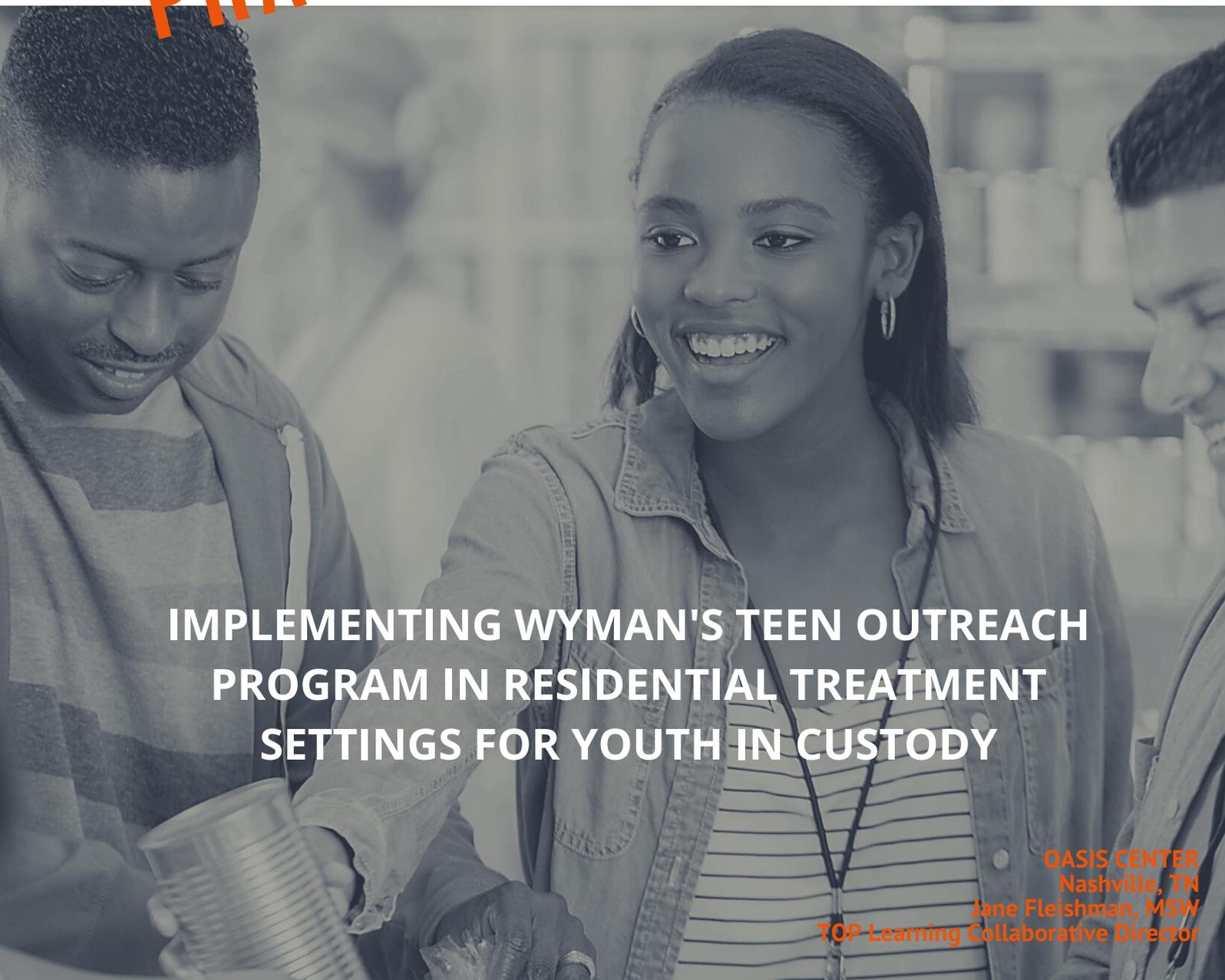


# TOP LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR YOUTH

PRACTICE BRIEF | 2020

**oasis**  
YOUTH. COMMUNITY. ACTION.



IMPLEMENTING WYMAN'S TEEN OUTREACH  
PROGRAM IN RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT  
SETTINGS FOR YOUTH IN CUSTODY

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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

In 2012, Oasis Center began contracting with the TN Department of Children's Services to oversee implementation of Wyman's Teen Outreach Program (TOP) for adolescents in state custody who were receiving residential treatment. Acting as a Replication Partner in **Wyman's National Network**, Oasis contracts with selected Tennessee mental health providers to make TOP a part of what they offer to custody youth in residential treatment. In this role, Oasis trains and certifies provider staff to implement TOP and monitors for fidelity to the model. As of July 2020, ten provider agencies make up the TOP Learning Collaborative and implement 25 TOP groups (called clubs) at 18 locations across Tennessee. Just under 1,000 youth participate in TOP each year via the Learning Collaborative, most of them while in residential treatment and in Tennessee's foster care system.

This brief was created as part of Oasis' efforts in two areas: First, to learn about how the TOP model, originally designed for use in schools, works when adapted for use in foster care and juvenile justice settings, and second, to provide information that Learning Collaborative members can use to strengthen their TOP implementation.

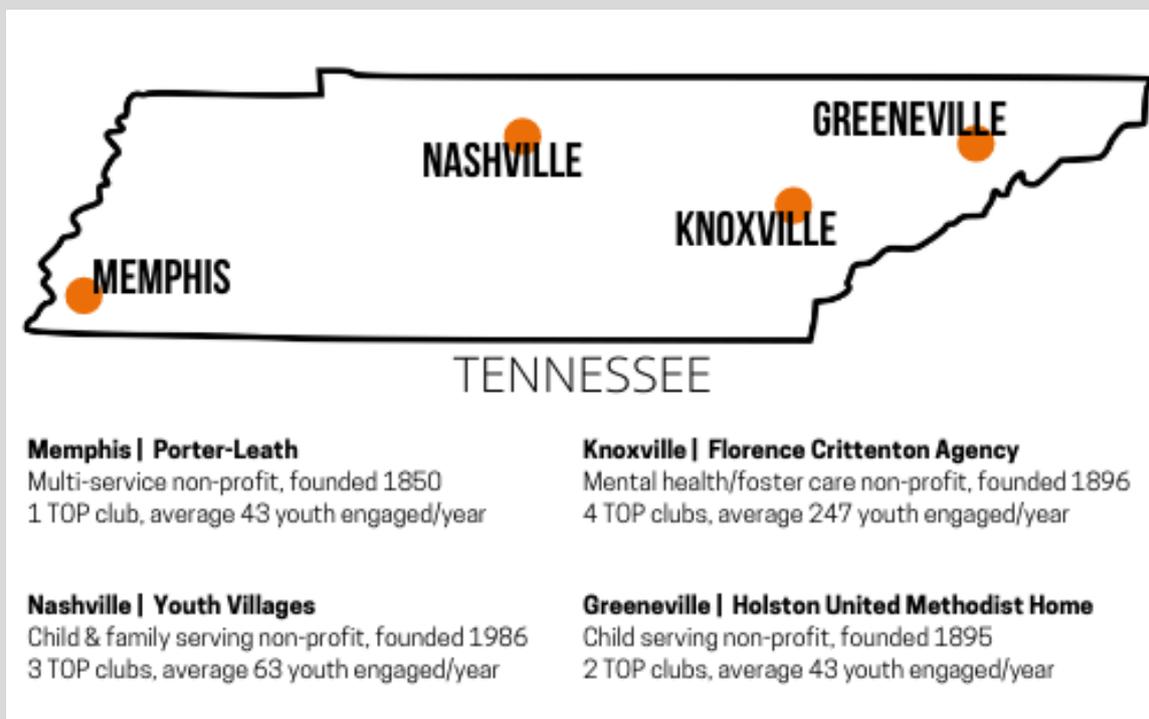
The brief follows a qualitative evaluation of the Learning Collaborative conducted in 2014-16 by **Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities**, as well as early support and consultation from staff at three of Tennessee's **Centers of Excellence for Children in State Custody** (C.O.E.), specifically Janet Todd, Ph.D., Jon Ebert, Ph.D., and Michelle Moser, Ph.D. The C.O.E. staff in particular helped us appreciate the crucial importance of leadership and other organizational factors in successful implementation of any model or practice.

The information contained in this brief was gathered through structured phone interviews with staff at four provider agencies that have shown the best ability to consistently implement TOP with fidelity over the past 8 years. At each agency we interviewed a senior leader with responsibility for TOP implementation as well as at least one staff person who actually delivers TOP to youth. During the spring and summer of 2020, the Learning Collaborative director conducted nine interviews, each about one hour in length. The interviews sought information about agency characteristics, culture, treatment approaches, administrative systems, success measures, perceived impact of TOP on youth and staff, and perceived fit of TOP in each agency.

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## IMPLEMENTATION SETTINGS OF INFORMANTS

Interview subjects were from 4 TOP Learning Collaborative member agencies (see map below), each a non-profit providing residential treatment for adolescents in state custody. Youth they serve entered custody either due to parental neglect or abuse or due to their own delinquent behavior or victimization. Average length of stay at facilities varied within each site but was estimated to be between 4 and 6 months at all agencies interviewed. Agencies reported being funded from a variety of sources, however, in all cases some costs were covered through a Performance-Based Contract with the TN Department of Children's Services. Three out of four of the agencies were located in urban areas.



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### POSITIVE VISIONS & COLLABORATIVE CULTURES

**Strengths-based goals, collaborative cultures and relative stability over time** are elements of organizational capacity that these successful organizations have in common. Youth in these facilities have individual treatment plans based on their assessed needs and regularly receive mental health services. Beyond treatment plan goals, however, it is notable that most informants described their main goals for youth in positive terms (as opposed to problem-focused), for example: “to get an education” or “to be able to think for themselves and know they have choices.” In a similar spirit, most staff interviewed described their agency cultures as ones that value collaboration and a sense of equality among youth and staff at all levels---everyone counts and everyone contributes to solutions. The agencies all had much longer histories as organizations than any other TOP Learning Collaborative member agencies, three of them well over 100 years.

### THE RIGHT STAFF WITH THE RIGHT SUPPORT

**Leadership staff recognize that some, but not all, staff are highly motivated and excited to deliver TOP.** TOP implementation is best assigned to staff who are creative, who like interacting with youth, and who enjoy a group setting.

**Leadership has a role in ensuring that staff have protected time to prepare for weekly TOP activities.** Staff responsible for delivering TOP directly to youth require time in their work day to prepare for each TOP session. Lessons must be reviewed, materials gathered, copies of hand-outs made. Sometimes arrangements must be made to transport youth to community sites for service learning. All of this takes time and the ability to break away from being “on the floor” with youth. As one informant said, “when you come on the floor, it's like drinking from a fire hose---there's a lot coming at you all at once.” Three out of four of the agencies included in this study assigned TOP delivery to house managers or case managers, roles with relatively more control

## 05 FINDINGS

over their schedules than front line/direct care staff. Only one agency utilized direct care staff to deliver TOP and these staff reported that the need for them to be on the floor and available to youth at all times meant they often had to prepare for TOP during non-work hours.



### MULTIPLE POSITIVE IMPACTS

**Training staff in the TOP model is likely to have broader positive impacts on organizations in addition to the impact on youth.** Consistent with findings of the Brandeis study mentioned above, informants reported that TOP training increases staff feelings of competence and that staff trained in TOP use its group facilitation methods not only in TOP, but in other groups they lead. Skills for *High Quality Facilitation* are a key element of the TOP Training of Facilitators. A foundational aspect of *High Quality Facilitation* is the ability to establish strong and supportive relationships with teens. Beyond that it includes such things as the ability to empower youth with voice and choice, to model empathy and respect, to successfully structure dialogue within the group, and to help youth preserve through challenges. Certification as a TOP Facilitator requires demonstration of at least initial mastery of High Quality Facilitation.

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**Direct care staff whose duties are largely defined as maintaining security benefit from the elements of Positive Youth Development they learn through TOP.** Informants reported that even a basic overview of TOP methods gives these direct care staff tools and motivation for positive engagement with youth, including allowing for more youth voice and choice. If security staff need to be in the room when TOP is being delivered, it is optimal for those staff to have a formal orientation to TOP goals and methods. Oasis Center provides this type of orientation by request and at no cost to Learning Collaborative member organizations.

**Youth in residential settings who participate in TOP regularly demonstrate that they find TOP relevant to their lives and retain what they learn in TOP.**

Informants uniformly reported that they know TOP works because they hear youth use the language of TOP outside of TOP groups or see young people teach peers things they learned in TOP. Similarly, informants reported that youth are quick to describe how meaningful TOP service learning experiences are for them, including reminding them of their self-worth ("I'm not just a bad kid") and ability to be contributors to the community.

### LEADERSHIP MATTERS

**Initial and ongoing support of agency leadership is of primary importance in the successful use of TOP to improve outcomes for youth.** For instance, a theme of our interviews was the recommendation that TOP be well integrated into an agency's functioning rather than treated as an add-on. Informants provided a number of examples from their own experience, all of which require the influence and involvement of leadership staff:

1. Make TOP a regular agenda item of management meetings, including: problem solving a staffing shortage that might impact TOP activities in the near future, decisions about which staff should attend TOP Facilitator training, communication of TOP successes and challenges.
2. Consider assigning administrative duties related to TOP to staff other than those who deliver TOP to youth. Examples include: Making administering pre/post youth surveys part of in-take and discharge processes; assigning administrative staff the weekly task of submitting fidelity data to Oasis Center.

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3. Enhance a direct care staff person's job description to include oversight of logistics related to TOP. New duties would include holding other staff accountable for offering TOP consistently, obtaining supplies needed for TOP groups, arranging for staff to attend TOP trainings, being a point of contact for Oasis Center, and communicating ongoing needs to leadership. One leader interviewed for this brief reported that his agency promoted a direct care staff member so that they were responsible for these kinds of support tasks for TOP as well as other evidence-based groups at their agency, recognizing this role as necessary for quality of delivery.
4. Designate a room as "the TOP Room," a space where staff can store needed supplies and that youth see as special and different from settings where they usually spend their time.
5. Make budget available for TOP Facilitators to purchase supplies needed for TOP groups, typically flip charts, markers, snacks and the like. Most informants make good use of the mini-grant fund Oasis administers that allows youth to request up to \$250 to support individual service learning projects. However, this fund isn't available for needs outside of service learning activities.

## > IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE <

The interviews on which this brief is based were limited in number. However, the information obtained matched well with Oasis Center's experience over the previous nearly nine years of overseeing TOP implementation for custody youth in TN. Informants fleshed out and provided explanations for many things we had observed during that time period. Implications for practice include the following.

**Leadership should be thoughtful in choosing which staff will deliver TOP.** Not all youth workers, even good ones, have the personal style and motivation to skillfully lead groups.

**Those staff who are assigned to lead TOP need protected time to prepare for TOP activities, support for administrative tasks associated with TOP and a small budget to purchase supplies.** Protected planning time and administrative support are essential for direct care workers. A situation where staff must regularly use out-of-work time to prepare for TOP is not a fair or sustainable strategy.

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**Investing in staff attendance at TOP Facilitator Training can improve youth worker performance beyond TOP delivery.** The training appears to influence staff to use methods that are developmentally appropriate and engaging for adolescents, including group facilitation skills. In fact, informants consistently report that staff use these skills learned through TOP to improve other groups they lead.

**The effectiveness of direct care staff whose duties are largely defined as maintaining security can be enhanced through learning TOP's Positive Youth Development approach.**

With regard to organizational capacity, it is notable that the agencies profiled in this brief were alike in that they hold holding **strengths-based agency goals for youth, strive to create collaborative cultures**, and have long corporate histories. This is congruent with the intended culture of TOP groups.

**Finally, thoughtful and consistent support from leadership staff is key to successful implementation of TOP.** Many, if not most, success factors are outside the control of line staff and require the continual and strategic involvement of leadership at various levels. With that support in place, informants uniformly agree that TOP makes very useful contributions to programs of residential treatment for adolescents in custody.



We extend our sincere thanks to all the individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this Brief. Likewise, our gratitude goes out to all the essential youth workers who continue to invest their time and labor, even during a pandemic, to support the healthy development of young people.