

# KEYS TO DEVELOPING STRONG CRITICAL MENTORING MODELS

In addition to the reflection questions and recommendations offered elsewhere in this resource, the following checklist of suggested milestones can help those of you doing the work determine where you are at in building and strengthening what you can offer.

## 1. Defining and Designing Your Model

- Our program has not only solicited but also understood and honored the perspectives of youth, caregivers, and other key stakeholders in determining the youth needs and challenges to be addressed by our mentoring services.
- Our program has assessed the resources, assets, and services available to the youth we wish to serve and understand where there are gaps and how our mentoring services will fit into this larger ecosystem of support.
- Our program has defined what critical mentoring means for our context and has developed a theory of change or [logic model](#) that explains how the support of mentors will help build critical consciousness in youth and aid them in taking critical action. (See the sample “Theory of Change” in the *Critical Mentoring Supplement to the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* for one generalized example.)
- Our program has developed a [logic model](#) that details the inputs, resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes of our mentoring services.
- Our program has settled on a match structure that we think will fit the needs of our youth and the preferences of our mentors.
- Our program design and development process has involved youth at each stage and we are confident that young people will find our services to be aligned with what they are looking for. We have the buy-in of not only these youth but also their caregivers.

## 2. Assets Supporting the Work

- Our program has developed a robust network of partner organizations and other service providers that can help with youth and mentor referrals and provide additional support to the youth and families we serve.
- Our program has identified the qualifications we require of staff members that are aligned with our critical mentoring approach.
- We offer training to new and current staff members on critical mentoring approaches and other relevant key topics.
- Our board of directors, advisory committee, or other oversight groups are all aware of our critical mentoring focus and on board with this approach to mentoring relationships and outcomes.
- We have a fundraising plan that can provide adequate resources from entities that understand our mission and are supportive of a critical mentoring approach.
- We do not accept funding from organizations that expect us to conform to depictions of mentoring that are grounded in saviorism, white supremacy, or oppressive systems or structures. Our values and work are not “for sale” in service of the needs or goals of dominant power structures.

## 3. Implementing Your Vision

### Finding and Welcoming Participants

- We have a sense of which youth our program would best support and a plan for reaching out to these youth and families on a regular basis to help us build (early in the program cycle) and participate in our program (over time).
- We have strategies in place that allow youth and families to discuss, understand, and promote our program and bring others into our services.
- We have eligibility criteria for mentors and a plan to find and invite these members of the community into our program.
- We have identified a range of youth and mentors we can support each year with our current resources and staff and are committed to quality over quantity.

### Program Participation and Safety

- We have identified the expectations for youth and families to minimally participate in our services and a process for accepting them into the program.
- We have a process for referring youth and families whose needs are beyond our capacity to other service provider and supports.
- We have a standardized process for determining the suitability of new mentor applicants into our program that includes relevant background and reference checks, as well as a determination that they can mentor youth in alignment with our organizational values and critical mentoring framework.

### Preparation and Teaching of Youth and Mentors

- We have developed a strong mentor training that grounds them in a critical mentoring framework and explains their role in supporting mentees on their youth-led journey.
- We have also identified ongoing mentor training topics and developed relevant materials that can further build mentor skills over time as needs and challenges emerge in their mentoring relationships.
- We have an orientation for youth (and caregivers, as relevant) on how they can fully participate in our program and their role in making their mentoring relationships successful.
- Our training materials for all participants (both mentors and youth/caregivers) cover key critical mentoring topics, such as intersectionality, critical consciousness, youth voice, and principles of community engagement and action.
- Our program utilizes program alumni as trainers, guest speakers, recruiters, and assets to the program over time.
- We have a schedule or process for delivering our trainings that is a good fit for our participants and maximizes the learning about this work (e.g., having mentors and youth go through trainings together to facilitate critical dialogue).

## Forming Relationships Between Youth and Mentors

- Our program has determined the structure and process for connecting mentors and youth participants. This can include one-to-one mentoring pairs, group mentoring configurations, or even unmatched mentoring where adults and youth interact more organically based on their interests and preferences.
- Our process for creating mentoring relationships offers youth a meaningful voice in who they work with and the focus of their relationships.
- Our relationship approach offers flexibility, so that youth can work with multiple mentors or form groups to support projects and activities.

## Supporting Mentoring Relationships

- Our staff has a process by which we check in with all youth participants to ensure that their needs are being met and that each young person is fully participating in the mentoring experience.
- We have designed program activities that are youth-led and that align with the core goals of our program.
- Our staff understands how to engage youth in critical dialogue and how to build their critical motivation and action over time.
- We debrief critical action experiences with youth and mentors so that we can learn from the experience, process feelings, and plan constructive next steps and actions around the issues our youth care about.
- We have a process for honoring youth achievement and celebrating the work that young people and their mentors do together.
- Our program regularly checks in with parents and caregivers to ensure that they understand what's happening in the program and how they can be involved in the mentoring relationships.
- We provide professional development to our staff so that they know how to handle moments of crisis, both for the youth we serve and the community as a whole, and respond in meaningful ways.

## Transitioning Mentoring Relationships

- We have standard processes for handling situations where youth or mentors leave the program unexpectedly or prematurely that includes processing that departure with remaining participants.
- We have meaningful activities planned for the end of the program “year” or “cycle” that allows all participants to celebrate success and offer their perspectives on how to improve the program moving forward.
- When young people have a negative experience in the program, our staff can step in to help them process that experience and learn from it — no young person is left to handle a negative experience on their own.
- We have clear guidelines around contact between staff, mentors, and youth that are communicated to all once their formal participation in the program ends.
- Our program has a plan to keep in contact with mentor and youth participant alumni so that we can involve them in the program in meaningful ways in the future, particularly using former youth participants as future mentors.

#### 4. Youth and Mentors Examining the Difference the Program is Making

- Our program evaluation efforts are always informed by youth perspectives and focused on what they want to understand about the mentoring experience.
- Youth and families, as well as mentors, take an active role in collecting and analyzing data for our evaluation.
- Youth, caregivers, mentors, and other stakeholders all have a say in how program results are described and reported publicly.
- We conduct ongoing process evaluation so that we are holding ourselves accountable for delivering the program at a high level of quality.
- We also engage in evaluation activities that examine the personal growth and achievement that youth and mentors experience through participating in our program — and these outcomes are connected to our program’s theory of change.
- If our program has engaged in youth-led projects in the community, our evaluation efforts seek to capture that impact by collecting data demonstrating that our critical mentoring work is facilitating positive change beyond our program walls.