



Austin, Texas

Coordinating Data about Services to Drive Change

How a community built a state-of-the-art online tool to map and track youth services.



Web of information: The home page of the YSM site.

When community leaders in Austin set out to improve outcomes for the city's youth several years ago, they quickly found themselves frustrated by a lack of information about what services were available to youth.

Sure, this coalition of 50 youth-serving organizations knew about lots of programs – but no one knew about all the services offered by government, private organizations and businesses, and much of what they did know was in fragments.

They wanted basic information about where the programs were, what age groups they served and what types of services they provided. What Austin needed, says organizer Suzanne Hershey, was a way to “identify and address gaps and overlaps in services and supports for youth.”

This was no job for an Excel spreadsheet. It had to be comprehensive, instantly updateable, accessible to providers and the public, and include data to help shape program decisions. The coalition committed to create a cutting-edge database to help school counselors and social workers connect youth to services and help providers better match programs to needs.

Building the Database

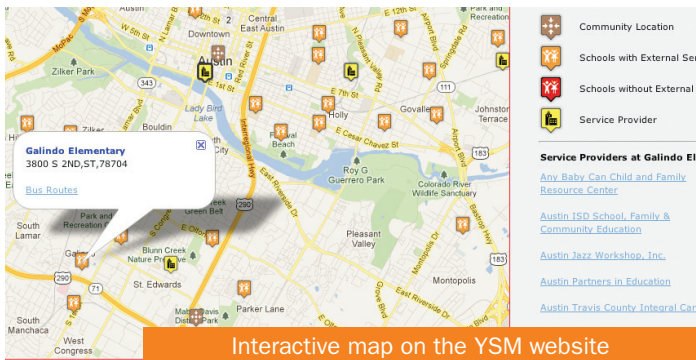
After Workforce Solutions Capital Area and the Community Action Network convened a Youth Issues Forum focused on outcomes for local youth, several dozen local organizations serving children and youth began meeting on a regular basis in 2004. That group, under Hershey's facilitation, grew into the Austin Ready by 21 Coalition, which is made up of youth service providers, educators, government staffers and teen advisers.

What Austin needed ... was a way to identify and address gaps and overlaps

To achieve their mission, the coalition members first tried to assess how kids were doing and how they were being served. When they set out to gather information about all the city's youth services, they turned to one of the Ready by 21 tools to help conduct a program landscape mapping process: a survey of a community's youth services, including such information as locations, ages and numbers of participants, services offered, and eligibility requirements. Communities around the country have used this process to improve youth services.

To steer the work, the coalition formed a Youth Services Mapping team comprised of the Austin





Interactive map on the YSM website

Independent School District, city government, the local United Way and other nonprofits. The Forum for Youth Investment provided technical assistance and ongoing coaching to help build and carry out the survey, which became the cornerstone of the Web-based mapping system.

Turning a Database into a Tool

The school district provided a Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant to support the creation of an online version of the tool.

The Youth Services Mapping team contracted with a local software developer to create a user-friendly website that provides information to visitors and takes in new information from registered providers.

The site, Youth Services Mapping (www.ysm-austin.org), was launched in 2009 with a series of trainings for program providers. School counselors, teachers and youth program providers can search for services and input information about their programs.

Information for Families and Schools

Visitors to the YSM site can search for services by various criteria, including type (from arts and college readiness to parent education and substance abuse), age, location and time of day. Families can be directed to appropriate services based on the needs of their children.

The YSM site also links to the United Way's 2-1-1 network in Austin. The 2-1-1 system provides a telephone hotline for families to find such services as job training and employment, food pantries, help for an aging parent and affordable housing options. Linking the YSM site and the 2-1-1 system ensures that information about services is kept current and comprehensive for families in need.

At schools, the tool helps counselors find resources available on their campuses and channel youth to appropriate resources.

Data-Driven Planning

The coalition plans to use the mapping tool to measure outcomes versus services and make improvements. For example, if there is a sharp increase in teen drug abuse and the map shows are few programs providing healthy behavior education, the coalition will work toward increasing those services in specific areas.

In addition to their work on program landscape mapping, the Austin Ready by 21 Coalition has focused on improving the quality of afterschool programming. Through its participation in the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Challenge, Austin has been able to make improvements in the delivery of services for a wide variety of youth-serving organizations. Staff are observed and trained to create high-quality experiences for children and youth.

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For more information, visit www.readyby21.org