



MY-CIL Practice Brief #8

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Program and Activity Recommendations for CILs Working with Youth with Disabilities from Minority Backgrounds: Focus Group Findings

About the MY-CIL Project. Minority Youth and Centers for Independent Living (MY-CIL) is a collaborative effort of Hunter College; the Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York; Independent Living Research Utilization; and Mathematica. The Administration for Community Living's National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research and the Office of Independent Living Programs funded MY-CIL to improve outcomes for out-of-school youth and young adults (ages 14 to 24) with disabilities. Specifically, the project seeks to produce and share knowledge that empowers Centers for Independent Living (CILs) to improve outcomes for youth and young adults with significant disabilities from nationally recognized racial and ethnic minority groups who have completed or otherwise left secondary education.

Clarifying terms

Youth from minority backgrounds. MY-CIL uses the term *youth from minority backgrounds* to refer to transition-age youth and young adults (ages 14 to 24) from nationally recognized racial and ethnic minority groups.

Out-of-school youth (OSY) with disabilities. MY-CIL uses the term OSY to refer to transition-age youth and young adults (ages 14 to 24) who have completed or otherwise left secondary education.

In this brief: We conducted three virtual focus groups with OSY with disabilities who come from minority backgrounds to learn about how CILs can improve their outreach and programs for this population. Conducted over Zoom in June 2022, each focus group included 7 to 10 participants who lived in Illinois, New York City, or South Carolina. This brief highlights recommendations for CIL programs and activities from youth with disabilities who come from minority backgrounds.

Focus group methods and recruitment strategies

We partnered with three CILs—Southern Illinois CIL, Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York; and Able South Carolina—to recruit OSY from minority backgrounds for the focus groups. We recruited 10 participants for the Illinois focus group, 7 participants for the New York City focus group, and 9 participants for the South Carolina focus group. See Table 1 for more information on the participants.

Table 1. Self-reported characteristics of focus group participants

Characteristic	Number of focus group participants
Age	
18 to 21	11
22 to 24	15
Race and ethnicity	
Black or African American	18
Asian	1
American Indian or Alaska Native	3
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	3
Hispanic (including persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central or South American origin)	2
Gender	
Female	9
Male	17

Note: Data on race and ethnicity come from participants' responses to the online screening survey. Data on age and gender come from participants' responses during screening phone calls. Categories for race and ethnicity are not mutually exclusive.

Findings

In this section we highlight participants' recommendations for programs and activities for youth with disabilities from minority backgrounds.

Recommendations for CIL programs and activities

Participants described the kind of programs and activities they would enjoy and value, which include learning about activities related to employment and independent living, exploring new hobbies, and connecting with other people with disabilities.

How can CILs address youth's career and independent living goals?

Participants expressed interest in activities to help them explore potential careers. Job interests varied, including architecture, computer programming, entrepreneurship, tailoring, and finding remote work positions. Participants also want support for conflicts that might arise in employment, such as handling employers' doubts related to their disability. "For me, maybe it's the employers doubt like...will I achieve this task when I am disabled?" said one participant. "You know like they can't show it, but you can feel like they're doubting you."

Participants also expressed enthusiasm for learning about independent living activities such as housing and personal care in order to build confidence and increase their independence. Participants were also eager for opportunities to grow their hobbies, learn new things, and engage in physical exercise. One person said, "Physical activities and exercise can help us with disabilities achieve our mental and physical potential." Finally, participants described leisurely, fun activities they enjoy with friends, such as watching movies, listening to music, or "hanging out" by a pool. A blend of instructional and less formal activities would satisfy their desire to learn, practice new skills, and socialize with peers in a relaxed environment. See Table 2 for examples of participants' areas of interest.

Table 2. Areas of interest for youth with disabilities

Interest area	Examples of activities in which youth requested more support and guidance
Financial management	Opening bank accounts, paying back loans
Hobbies and interests	Sewing and crocheting, painting, baking, administering first aid, techniques for taking care of babies, watching movies with friends, music, community service projects
Housing assistance	Searching for housing, dealing with landlords, learning about mortgages and insurance
Independent living skills	Completing household tasks, attending to personal hygiene, building confidence interacting with others
Physical activities	Bowling, exercise classes, gardening, team sports, dancing, swimming
Postsecondary education	Applying for scholarships

How can CILs create spaces for youth with disabilities to connect with each other?

Having a place to discuss their mental health and how they are “faring or surviving” was important to participants. One participant reflected on how support from other people with disabilities has helped them in the past: “When you talk to other people, you get to know how they deal with challenges that we people who live with disabilities face, challenges such as stigmatization, negative attitudes, and so on.” One participant who had experience working with a CIL shared that connecting with supportive peers and mentors with disabilities has been transformative: “At first, during that time of early disabilities, I used to have breakdowns, anxiety, depression, but when I came up with this [CIL] and I got into a discussion with other disabled people, I was able to feel whole again, I was able to incorporate myself into the society and be able to get comfortable with myself.”

Connecting with other people with disabilities helped participants feel less isolated, cultivate self-advocacy skills, and share and learn coping strategies. For example, one participant said, “I would say I would really lack the skill of confidence and also skills on how to stop overthinking. Most times when I get some racist comments about me, I often get depressed.” Moderators can play a key role to ensure each participant can speak about their experience. One person noted, “I like groups where people are really willing to share their experiences, not just one or two people speaking and others just listening.”

Many participants mentioned that having a designated mentor would be a valuable resource to help keep them motivated and moving toward goals. One participant explained, “As a disabled person, you get a lot of discouragement and you definitely need someone to back you up and you need a backbone.” One person said that they particularly wanted one-on-one mentoring relationships: “At this stage, we need a lot of guidance in how to go about with our life. So, I would love mentor attachments in which you will have a personal mentor you can go to.... Maybe just like two people per mentor would go a long way in order for the mentor to pay attention to our need.”

“If I have maybe certain goals about my career, my education ... I need someone who has experience in the same field and maybe they will tell me more about it. ... And above all, I think most important is support. You just need someone who will be there for you and telling you this is the right thing for you and encouraging you.”

(Focus group participant, age 23)

Key takeaways

- **Design targeted programs based on participants' independent living interests and goals**, such as financial management, exploring careers, completing household tasks, and assistance with housing issues.
- **Create opportunities to learn new skills or hobbies and have fun**, according to participants' interests.
- **Establish social support groups** for youth from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds with disabilities to discuss struggles related to their identities and disabilities, where every participant has a chance to share their experience and strategies to cope and build confidence.
- **Develop mentorship programs** for participants to receive individualized support.

Discussion

CILs can prioritize youth's preferences when planning the structure and content of programs and activities, offering a blend of instruction, support, and fun experiences. Program staff can create opportunities to actively listen to their consumers' preferences, design programs based on their interests, and recruit mentors who can provide specific expertise and motivate their mentees to achieve their goals.

Interested in other focus group findings?

To learn more about **conducting effective outreach** with out-of-school youth from minority backgrounds, see [MY-CIL Practice Brief #6: Ways CILs can Conduct Effective Outreach to Youth with Disabilities from Minority Backgrounds](#).

To learn more about **techniques for sustaining engagement** of out-of-school youth from minority backgrounds, see [MY-CIL Practice Brief #7: Ways CILs Can Sustain Engagement of Youth with Disabilities from Minority Backgrounds](#).

To learn more about MY-CIL

To learn more about MY-CIL, please visit <https://minorityyouthcil.com/>.

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