



MY-CIL Practice Brief #11

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Lessons from the MY-CIL Learning Collaborative: CIL practices to improve readiness to reach and serve out-of-school youth with disabilities from minority backgrounds

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

Introduction

A learning collaborative is an interactive group process meant to improve programs and performance through continuous learning, action, and planning. The Minority Youth and Centers for Independent Living (MY-CIL) project offered focused learning collaboratives to help CIL staff discover and discuss strategies to serve out-of-school youth with disabilities (OSY) from minority backgrounds. Independent Living Research Utilization facilitated three seven-month learning collaboratives from 2020 to 2022. Facilitators helped Centers for Independent Living (CIL) staff plan programs and activities to support minority youth. Each session began with a two-day virtual kickoff meeting, followed by monthly Zoom workshops in which participants explored strategies for implementing ideas, shared best practices, asked questions, identified barriers, and brainstormed solutions. Participants also used Slack, a live web-based discussion platform, for networking and peer learning.

In fall 2023, Mathematica conducted 10 informal virtual interviews with CIL staff who completed

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the learning collaborative. In these interviews, CIL staff discussed their challenges, solutions, and accomplishments since the learning collaborative ended. They shared steps their CILs are taking to be better equipped to improve outreach, services, and outcomes for OSY consumers. These interviews also sought to understand key lessons from the learning collaborative. This practice brief offers findings from these discussions and highlights ways CILs staff are advancing their efforts to reach and serve OSY from minority backgrounds. Staff from the following CILs participated in these interviews:

Table 1. Learning collaborative CILs interviewed

| CIL Name | Location |
|---|--------------------|
| Able South Carolina | Columbia, SC |
| Berkeley Center for Independent Living | Berkeley, CA |
| Boston Center for Independent Living | Boston, MA |
| Center for Independence | Grand Junction, CO |
| Disability Action Center | Chico, CA |
| Disability Network Southwest Michigan | Kalamazoo, MI |
| RAMP | Rockford, IL |
| Southern Illinois Center for Independent Living | Carbondale, IL |
| Suncoast Center for Independent Living | Sarasota, FL |
| Tri-County ILC | Akron, OH |

Findings

In this section, we highlight how CIL staff used information from the learning collaborative to thoughtfully craft and launch strategies to understand the CIL’s organizational readiness to infuse equity in policies and programs and build new partnerships to reach OSY from minority backgrounds. In the key takeaway’s summaries, we link to helpful resources for further reading and guidance.

Organizational Changes

CILs assessed and changed organizational policies to center equity in organizational practices, training initiatives, and recruitment and hiring strategies to foster a more inclusive and culturally competent organization.

Organizational equity assessment.¹ CIL staff explained that an equity assessment of organizational strengths and weaknesses related to equity and cultural competence helped them identify ways to advance equitable practices and policies.² One staff member shared that

¹ An equity assessment involves collecting and analyzing information, usually through multiple data-gathering processes, to identify and address inequitable policies, practices, procedures, and outcomes. Assessments provide opportunities to deeply examine all aspects of an organization to uncover strengths and weaknesses related to equity. (Adapted from the Equity Literacy Institute website at <https://www.equityliteracy.org/equity-assessment> and the City of Austin Equity Assessment Tool at <https://services.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=309466>.)

² Cultural competence ensures an organization values diversity, assesses itself, manages the dynamics of difference, gains and institutionalizes cultural knowledge, and adapts to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities it serves. (Adapted from the National Center for Cultural Competence website at <https://nccc.georgetown.edu/foundations/framework.php>.)

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the learning collaborative encouraged them to keep an open mind regarding equity learning, viewing it as "food for thought" rather than a judgment on the CIL or its practices. With this framing, CIL staff felt more comfortable identifying and discussing areas for improvement and growth.

Staff training. After assessing organizational strengths and weaknesses related to promoting equity, several CILs sought further training on anti-racism and cultural competence to improve staff members' understanding and work with minority communities. Some CILs also focused on understanding intersectionality (or the multiple aspects of an individual's identity which can combine to create unique challenges or layers of experienced discrimination) and acquired training to effectively serve groups facing overlapping forms of oppression. For example, youth dealing with mental health challenges, experiencing homelessness, or residing in rural areas. One CIL participated in a Native American tribal-led training that resulted in the CIL changing its intake paperwork to be more inclusive.

Policy changes. After completing an organizational equity assessment, CILs often enacted policy changes, including integrating outreach to people of color and other marginalized communities into strategic plans. One CIL incorporated anti-racism principles into required staff training. Another CIL shifted a paid holiday from Presidents' Day to Juneteenth, which commemorates the end of slavery in the United States. Recognizing Juneteenth as a paid holiday shows respect for the cultural and historical significance of the day for Black Americans and is one potential way to demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity, diversity, and equity within the organization. CILs also devised concrete strategies to build a more diverse organization, including CIL staff and CIL advisory boards. CILs ensure organizational understanding and commitment to equity by involving all staff in training and formalizing policies. Several CIL staff described challenges with losing momentum or a focus on equity in the past when individual staff equity champions left the organization; this collective approach can prevent disruptions in championing equity initiatives and making progress.

Recruitment and hiring. CILs assessed their job-posting language and hiring practices. This process included replacing biased phrases with more inclusive language in job postings to encourage applicants with diverse experiences.

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For example, one CIL's revised language states, "Research shows that women and individuals from underrepresented backgrounds often apply to jobs only if they meet 100% of the qualifications. We recognize that an applicant is unlikely to meet 100% of the qualifications for a given role. Therefore, if much of this position description describes you, then you are highly encouraged to apply for this role."
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Another CIL altered how they review job applications to use a practice called name blinding, or anonymous review. Name blinding removes personally identifiable information such as the applicant's name, gender, age, or ethnicity from resumes or applications. This practice aims to focus solely on the qualifications, skills, and experience of candidates, promoting a fairer evaluation based on merit rather than potentially biased assumptions linked to someone's name or background. It also promotes a more diverse and inclusive hiring process.

The same CIL also changed its interviewing approach. Previously, the CIL held panel interviews, which it recognized presented a significant power imbalance and a potentially intimidating experience for applicants. The CIL now has staff with different roles participate in

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interviews. Staff also begin interviews with introductions that include preferred pronouns and visual descriptions, if needed. Since making these changes to promote more diverse staff hiring, the CIL reported it has hired three new staff from minority backgrounds.

Key takeaways for CILs

- Assess organizational strengths and areas for growth related to equity, including in CIL policies, staff make-up, and cultural competence. This resource offers several [assessment tools](#) from which CILs can choose to guide this process, or the CIL could use the [Cultural and Linguistic Competence Assessment for Disability Organizations](#).
- Fill gaps in knowledge through trainings on topics such as anti-racism, intersectionality, and engaging people from different cultures or marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ or rural populations. Note: Look for trainings produced and presented by the communities you want to learn from; they are the experts on their lived experiences.
- Examine how the CIL recruits and hires people or includes people on the CIL advisory board. Look for opportunities to make these processes more equitable. This [resource](#) from the Academy to Innovate Human Resources offers some best practices.

Partnerships and Outreach Strategies

The learning collaborative helped CIL staff understand and appreciate the value of forming strong partnerships in the communities they serve. By building innovative partnerships and using new outreach and communication strategies, CIL staff have successfully collaborated with diverse groups, honed new approaches to reach and engage youth, and leveraged various community resources and funding streams to better serve OSY from minority backgrounds.

Innovative partnerships. CIL staff reflected on where they needed to build new partnerships to reach minority youth. Some CILs focused on creating new partnerships with high schools and local colleges, and one joined a speaker series on disability awareness at a community college. These partnerships presented opportunities to share information and engage with youth who might be leaving school with no immediate transition plans in place or with networks of students who might have friends in this situation. Another CIL partnered with the juvenile justice system, which allows correctional facility staff to refer youth with disabilities to their center. This partnership could be a key channel to reach OSY from minority backgrounds because about 65 to 70 percent of justice-involved youth have a disability (Saleh & Cook, 2020). The prevalence of disability among this population may be even higher among youth of color (Snydman, 2023).

Staff from several CILs shared that their staff composition does not reflect the diverse communities they serve and that building long-term and authentic partnerships requires dedication and humility. Many CILs are addressing this shortcoming through the intentional recruitment and hiring practices described above. In addition, several CILs formed new partnerships with minority organizations not represented on their staff, such as with LGBTQ, Hispanic, and Native American community leaders. Creating innovative partnerships have helped the CILs to reach OSY from minority backgrounds in different community settings and through other trusted community partners already connected with OSY. One staff member underscored that building trust with new partners requires commitment and humility, saying, “You can’t just leave brochures with a partner or a community agency, you need to immerse

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yourself in the culture of the desired population you want to reach.” Another CIL staff member working with tribes explained that tribes are not broken, and they do not need to be fixed. The staff member said that recognizing community strengths changes the CILs framing to acknowledge that “you are a solid community; what can we bring to you to augment what you already have?”

New outreach strategies. In addition to developing innovative partnerships, CILs learned and honed strategies for improving outreach approaches. Acknowledging the challenges of reaching OSY, staff from one CIL attended the Federation of Children with Special Needs conference that included 900 parents from across the state. CIL staff shared information about the CIL and youth programming with OSY’s families.

Other CILs evaluated and adapted how they share information to make messaging more appropriate, relevant, and appealing to OSY from minority backgrounds. Two CILs worked with marketing specialists who had expertise in digital media to tailor content and approaches to reach diverse communities. One CIL consulted with a staff member from a minority background to review and suggest edits to make marketing materials more inclusive and inviting, based on his lived experience and knowledge of the community. Another CIL translated outreach materials into other languages, in addition to making American Sign Language (ASL) video available through its language line. Staff from several CILs highlighted ways they use social media platforms, including Discord for youth group chat and TikTok to message and promote activities related to intersectionality, Juneteenth, and Pride Month. One staff member shared that their CIL also learned to add alt-text to social media posts to maximize accessibility. Cultivating new ways to share information and consistent dialogue with new community partners has strengthened CILs’ ability to reach and serve diverse youth.

Funding. CIL staff reported that new partner initiatives, outreach strategies, and programming have associated costs. CILs needed to either reallocate existing budgets or secure additional funding through new sources. CIL staff found new funding and shifted and braided existing funding to support important partnership and outreach efforts to reach and serve OSY from minority backgrounds. One CIL used funds from two funding streams and hired a bilingual staff member to serve as a bridge for students transitioning out of high school to connect them with adult services. Another CIL received an agency-specific multiyear grant to work with underrepresented youth by using insight from the learning collaborative to inform the grant application. The grant was for transition-aged youth, and the CIL can reapply for ongoing and future funding. Another CIL received a grant from the United Way to support enhancing engagement with black, indigenous, and people of color communities. Finally, recognizing that transportation poses a barrier for many people with disabilities, including OSY from minority backgrounds, one CIL allocated funding for youth to take Uber to and from center activities.

Key takeaways for CILs

- Approach new community partnerships with humility and take the time to [build trust](#).
- Conduct outreach to new groups in new community locations using different communication tools and styles through social media.
- Maximize inclusive practices, such as by making materials culturally relevant and accessible and using alt-text, ASL interpretation, and translation to other languages.

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- Consider braiding funding streams or seeking additional funding to support community partnerships and outreach initiatives.

Discussion

Staff from 10 CILs who completed the MY-CIL learning collaborative shared their insight and implemented impactful changes in policies and programs to effectively reach and assist OSY from minority backgrounds. To start, CILs can assess and adjust their focus on equity in staff training, company policies, and recruitment to promote diversity and inclusion. Fostering an internal understanding and priority for advancing equity can equip CIL staff to incorporate this lens in program outreach and activities.

CILs can enhance their outreach strategies by establishing innovative community partnerships with organizations that are familiar to OSY from minority backgrounds. These partnerships require collaborations with entities youth trust and relate to and require information-sharing with youth-serving entities such as schools and juvenile justice systems.

When forming new partnerships, CILs might seek to learn from different cultures and communities, particularly those not reflected among the backgrounds of CIL staff. CILs can embrace cultural humility, recognize community strengths, and ask communities for input on how CIL programs can best assist the community.

Lastly, CILs can explore funding options to help build partnerships and outreach initiatives. CILs can examine allocating or braiding existing resources or obtaining new grants for effective implementation.

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Interested in learning more about ways to engage and empower youth?

Check out Practice Brief #12: Lessons from the MY-CIL Learning Collaborative: CIL strategies to engage and empower out-of-school 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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