

Making Diversion Work in Rural Communities: Lessons from the Child and Family Charities Youth Accountability Program

Prepared for:
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Michigan Committee on Juvenile Justice
Lansing, MI
www.michigan.gov/mdhhs

Prepared by:
Altarum Institute
Novi, MI
www.altarum.org

Executive Summary

As a part of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Title II-funded evaluation led by Altarum, this qualitative study examines how Child and Family Charities (CFC) adapted the Youth Accountability Program (YAP) to meet the constraints and opportunities of a rural county. The report focuses not just on program effectiveness, but on how an established diversion model was modified to fit a rural context. Conducted as part of the broader evaluation, the study includes 10 interviews with program staff, court partners, caregivers, and youth to understand how the model was implemented and to identify early evidence of impact. Researchers used a structured coding and thematic analysis approach to identify key patterns across interviews related to program design, partnerships, rural adaptations, and impact. The goal of the project was to assess early success and to identify practical lessons that can inform expansion of diversion programs across Michigan.

Findings show that relationship-based, individualized support is the engine of the YAP program; staff build trust through consistent, personalized interactions, which allows them to tailor services and move youth beyond compliance toward meaningful behavior change. In adapting the program to a rural context, CFC paired this approach with flexibility and deep community integration. CFC addressed common barriers like transportation and limited access by embedding services in schools, courts, and community spaces, and by adapting how and when they engage families. These practical adjustments made the program more responsive to local needs.

Key partnerships sustain the model. In Shiawassee County, CFC's co-location within the courthouse transformed its relationship with the court from a referral source into a fully integrated system partner, enabling real-time communication and shared decision-making. Early results show individual and system-level change, including improvements in youth behavior and decision, as well as shifts in how local actors such as law enforcement respond to youth offenses. Overall, these findings demonstrate that when diversion programs are adapted thoughtfully to rural contexts, they can do more than serve individual youth; they can begin to reshape how entire communities approach juvenile justice.

Background

The MDHHS Title II Evaluation is an evaluation and technical assistance (TA) project led by Altarum for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) in support of the Title II Formula Grants Program under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA). The project focuses on determining whether Michigan's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)-funded juvenile justice programs, spanning delinquency prevention, intervention, treatment, and system improvement, are achieving their intended impacts.

Under this project, Altarum provides evaluation-focused TA to Title II grantees, supporting the development and implementation of comprehensive evaluation plans. Key activities include developing logic models, defining research questions, designing process and outcome measures, supporting data collection and analysis, and assisting grantees in producing evaluation reports. The project also delivers ongoing training to build grantee capacity for evaluation planning and implementation.

One example of a Title II-supported effort is the expansion of Child and Family Charities' (CFC) Youth Accountability Program (YAP), established in Lansing, into Shiawassee County, a more rural neighboring county. Supported by a grant from the Michigan Committee on Juvenile Justice, the program provides a structured diversion option for middle and high school youth, allowing eligible juvenile offenders to avoid formal court involvement by completing community-based programming. The YAP model emphasizes restorative justice and family-centered, wraparound services, including risk assessments, individualized case planning, and connections to community resources. Referrals are accepted from courts, law enforcement, schools, and parents, reflecting a cross-system approach to early intervention.

The purpose of this report is to identify key lessons learned from CFC's implementation of the YAP in Shiawassee County, specifically detailing the ways the model was adapted to fit a rural context.

Introduction

This project used qualitative methods to understand how CFC implemented and adapted its diversion model in a rural county. It focuses on key aspects of implementation, including partnerships, context-specific adaptations, and early indicators of success, with the aim of describing findings that can inform broader learning and support the expansion of juvenile justice diversion programs across Michigan.

Methodology

Interviews

The Altarum research team worked closely with CFC to conduct a total of 10 qualitative interviews. Altarum led all interviews, with the exception of the youth questionnaires, which were administered separately by CFC. Participants included CFC leadership, court partners, caregivers/family members, and youth involved in the program. A full breakdown of interview participation is provided in Table 1.

Exhibit 1: Interview Participation

Role	Facilitator	Total Participants (N)	Modality
CFC Leadership	Altarum	2	Virtual interview
CFC Case Manager	Altarum	2	Virtual interview
Court Partners	Altarum	1	Virtual interview
Caregivers/Family	Altarum	2	Phone interview
Youth	CFC Case Manager	3	In-person questionnaire

The Altarum research team and CFC case management staff primarily recruited participants via email outreach with additional recruitment occurring through in-person outreach by CFC staff. For the interviews, they used multiple modes of data collection to accommodate participant preferences and increase accessibility. Altarum research staff conducted interviews with adult participants virtually

via Microsoft Teams or by phone; virtual interviews were recorded and transcribed with participant consent. CFC case managers conducted interviews with youth participants in person using a structured questionnaire. This approach was selected to facilitate a more comfortable and appropriate setting for youth respondents.

The research team developed different interview guides for each participant group with questions tailored to their roles and experiences with the program. These guides explored key topics such as program implementation, partnerships, adaptations to the rural context, and perceived outcomes. The analysis was subject to limitations related to the program's early stage of implementation and the relatively small qualitative sample.

Analysis

Two researchers who conducted all Alarum-led interviews also led the analysis. A structured analysis plan guided this process, outlining the purpose of the analysis and coding assignments. First, one researcher reviewed all transcripts and developed an initial codebook. A second researcher then reviewed and refined the codebook, after which both researchers independently coded all transcripts. The coded transcripts were used to generate a coding report, which informed the thematic analysis and the findings described below.

Findings

Findings from this qualitative analysis highlight that successful implementation of the YAP in a rural context depends on adapting service delivery and program design to local conditions. While relationship-based, individualized support remains the core driver of engagement and early outcomes, its effectiveness is strengthened by how it is operationalized in rural settings: through flexible approaches and community integration. In Shiawassee County, CFC adapted the model by embedding services within schools, courts, and other community spaces, reducing access barriers and increasing visibility. Partnerships, such as those with the court system, function not just as referral sources but as core infrastructure that enables coordination and shared ownership of youth outcomes. Early findings suggest that these adaptations are not only supporting youth behavior change but also contributing to broader shifts toward diversion-based, prevention-oriented responses within the local system.

These findings are explored in more detail in the sections below.

Exhibit 2. Adapting the Youth Accountability Program for a Rural Context

Core YAP Inputs (unchanged elements)	Rural Context Adaptations (what changed)	Early Outcomes & System Effects
•Relationship-based, individualized case management	•Flexible scheduling (evenings, weekends, virtual options)	•Increased youth engagement beyond compliance
•Restorative justice framework	•Transportation solutions (meeting youth where they are)	•Improved family trust and participation
•Family-centered, wraparound approach	•Co-location within the courthouse	•Reduced access barriers to services
•Multi-referral pathway (courts, schools, law enforcement)	•Deep partnerships with schools and community organizations	•Faster coordination and shared decision-making
	•Staff time invested in community relationship-building	•Early shifts toward diversion-based responses

Relationship-based, individualized support drives impact.

Tailored support is an important driver of program impact related to both engagement and outcomes for youth and families. Across interviews, staff shared that meaningful change is rooted in trust which they build through consistent and personalized interactions over time. Rather than relying solely on structured programming frameworks, CFC case managers invest time in getting to know each youth's circumstances and motivations, which allows them to tailor their support accordingly. This enables staff to move beyond surface-level compliance and support actual behavioral change.

> *Once they start to trust me and see that I'm actually… doing what I say… they are willing to work with me pretty much through whatever."*
> ~ CFC Case Manager

Parents/Caregivers reinforced this perspective, describing the importance of feeling supported by staff who are approachable and genuinely invested in youth success.

> *She's going to take him into community service… helps him work through his problems… she [CFC Case Manager] really cares and sometimes that's really hard to find."*
> ~ Parent/Caregiver

While case managers demonstrate flexibility in how they engage with families, these adaptations primarily function to strengthen relationships and sustain participation despite common barriers.

> *Like I said, if it's meeting online, picking their child up, stuff like that, you know, we've met at 8:00 PM at night before. I really, I've met on the weekends with clients."*
> ~ CFC Case Manager

Even within a short implementation period, these individualized approaches are associated with observable changes in youth behavior and social environments, including shifts towards more positive peer groups.

> *...She has changed some of her friends; I know she doesn't hang out with the same friends who got her into trouble anymore."*
> ~ Parent/Caregiver

Rural success depends on flexibility and deep community integration.

CFC staff members agreed that the most important tool in their toolkit when it came to successful rural implementation was community integration and partnerships with local entities. They talked at length about the work they did to build relationships and understand the community in Shiawassee County before program implementation. For example, program leaders met with schools and the local court to describe the program and its aims and to seek feedback on whether they felt the program would be a good fit for their community and its youth. Through these conversations, they gained a clearer understanding of the County's needs and those of its youth. They were then able to explain the diversion program and how it could address those needs, ultimately building a trusting, mutually beneficial relationship.

> *Being able to meet at the schools and meet them where they're at or meet in the community... is the difference that we have to make."*
> ~ CFC Case Manager

Rural service delivery also required adaptations to account for transportation barriers such as distance and competing family responsibilities.

> *We've really had to do it with like Zoom calls, phone calls... I've picked up some clients too... we've had to be really creative about where we're going to be holding the classes."*
> ~ CFC Case Manager

Partnerships are not just sources of support; they are a foundational infrastructure.

Partnerships with courts, schools, and other community organizations such as the YMCA function as core infrastructure for the program. These partnerships support day-to-day program operations by helping CFC with such things as; identifying and receiving referrals, coordinating services for youth and families, communicating quickly with system partners, and troubleshooting any challenges as they arise. Specifically, in Shiawassee County, CFC staff are co-located within the courthouse which allows for real-time communication, an easy referral pipeline, and shared problem-solving.

> *We are actually embedded at the courthouse… so if I need more information… I will literally just walk upstairs."*
> ~ CFC Case Manager

Court partners echo the value of this proximity and how it allows for issues to be addressed quickly.

> *She [CFC Case Manager] knows how to get her cell phone and come in my office and just say, 'hey, what do you think of this?'… we're very just, let's just talk about it and figure it out."*
> ~ Court Partner

This level of integration also supports shared ownership over decision-making and youth outcomes. Court staff and CFC case managers work together to determine appropriate referrals and necessary process adaptations.

> *She [CFC Case Manager] and I kind of have a little system… she's like, how do you want me to handle these? I'm like, just call me, talk to me about it."*
> ~ Court Partner

Partnerships with schools and community organizations extend this infrastructure by increasing access points for youth and embedding services in familiar environments. These partnerships benefit the program by making services more visible, accessible, and approachable for youth and families. It also allows staff to build relationships in settings where youth spend time and may feel more comfortable.

> *We are in multiple different schools, so being able to talk with local school districts and being having access to space and to create those relationships again in that community with those school districts is vital to the success of the program."*
> ~ CFC Leadership

Mandated engagement becomes voluntary through establishing trust.

While most youth and families enter the program through a court or school referral, participants described how engagement evolves from compliance to meaningful participation over time. Initial reactions to the referral may include hesitation or resistance, often based on a misunderstanding of the program or previous negative experiences with punitive systems. These early perceptions sometimes created barriers to engagement. Staff address this by reframing participation as an opportunity rather than a punishment.

> *I often tell them… this is a great move by the court… much more benefit from a diversionary program than being formally introduced to the criminal justice system."*
> ~ CFC Case Manager

They also remind youth that the program is voluntary in an effort to reduce anxiety and build openness.

> *I kind of just reassure them… that the program's voluntary… once they hear that, they're like a lot better about it."*
> ~ CFC Case Manager

Trust is also built through consistent follow-through and reliability. When case managers "do what they say they're going to", youth and parents/caregivers experience the program as supportive and their engagement becomes less about avoiding consequences and more about willing participation in the process.

Even early indicators of success can show meaningful behavioral and system change.

Although the program is still in early implementation, participants reported signs of impact at the individual and systems levels. Youth described increased awareness of substance use and a growing sense of agency in their ability to change.

> *The people… they make me actually feel like I can accomplish getting out of here and becoming better."*
> ~ Youth Participant

These reflections demonstrate that early impacts may be as powerful as increased motivation and openness to behavior changes.

Parents/caregivers also observed early improvements in decision-making and willingness to engage in positive activities.

> *He likes it. He's willing to quit doing nicotine.*
> ~ Parent/Caregiver

Participants also identified early examples of system-level change, noting shifts toward diversion-based responses.

> *Instead of writing the ticket, [the officer] actually gave them my phone number…that is a huge win."*
> ~ CFC Case Manager

Taken together, these early indicators demonstrate immediate benefits for youth and potential for broad system transformation. While longer-term outcomes remain to be seen, the consistency of early feedback across youth, parents/caregivers, and staff suggest that the program is beginning to achieve its intended impact.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This evaluation points to a program model that is not only working but gaining traction in meaningful ways for youth and families. The YAP is demonstrating how relationship-based, individualized support, when paired with flexibility to adapt to local context, can drive engagement and spark behavioral change. In Shiawassee County, this approach is already reshaping how youth are supported, showcasing the power of community integration and close partnerships with court systems and schools. These early signs suggest that diversion is not just an alternative to traditional responses; it is a catalyst for change, with the potential to transform how communities respond to and support youth and to support the expansion of more effective, prevention-orientated approaches across the state of Michigan.

Based on these findings, the following strategies are recommended to implement this model effectively in rural communities.

	Recommendation	Rationale (from findings)	Practical Considerations for Rural Contexts
	**Start with deep community engagement; don't import a model.**	Successful implementation in Shiawassee County depended heavily on building strong local relationships before and during implementation.	Programs should be designed with, not for, the communities they serve. Early and ongoing engagement with local stakeholders results in a model that reflects local needs and resources. Tailoring the program in this way builds trust and improves the likelihood of successful implementation.
	**Invest in strong court and school partnerships early.**	In Shiawassee County, courts and schools functioned not only as referral partners, but as core infrastructure supporting coordination, communication, and shared problem-solving.	Establishing strong relationships early through regular communication, shared expectations, and, if possible, co-location can streamline processes and improve youth outcomes.
	**Design a program for flexibility.**	Transportation barriers, scheduling challenges, and limited service access required flexible approaches to communication, scheduling, and service delivery.	Programs operating in rural or otherwise resource-constrained settings should be designed to allow staff to meet families where they are. This adaptability supports sustained engagement over time.
	**Invest in the right staff.**	Relationship-based support and trust-building were central to youth and family engagement throughout implementation. Program staff are at the frontlines of this work, delivering individualized support and sustaining participation over time.	Program leadership should prioritize hiring individuals who are not only experienced and skilled but also relationship-oriented and deeply committed to working with youth and families.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate how diversion models can remain grounded in core principles while adapting to local realities. The experience in Shiawassee County suggests that successful rural implementation depends on flexibility, strong community partnerships, and relationship-based support that is responsive to youth and family needs. As Michigan and other states continue expanding diversion efforts, these lessons offer practical guidance for building more accessible, prevention-oriented approaches that strengthen outcomes for youth and communities.