



# RURAL PROGRAMMING

Families in rural locales experience a number of challenges unique from more urban environments, such as lack of or limited transportation, social isolation, limited services, and unique security and safety issues. Community design and culture can create obstacles for rural residents—especially for those with the highest needs—and can increase the risk of out-of-home placement of children and youth. However, it is these same features that Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (YAP) successfully builds upon to support youth and families in rural communities.

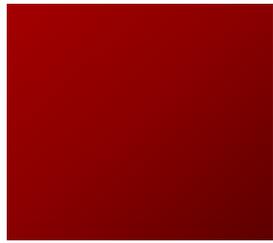
## Community Design

Because rural communities are scattered, residents must often travel long distances to access even basic services and resources. A dearth of public transportation systems effectively isolates residents who do not have operable, reliable private vehicles.

**Transportation barriers** make it difficult to make and keep appointments, obtain and retain employment, and get necessities at the best price. Families who must stretch their food budget and are without transportation face local community grocery store prices up to double those of grocery store chains in suburban or urban areas. Although driving is essential in rural areas, cost may be prohibitive. YAP staff in rural Thibodeaux, LA learned that an increase in motor vehicle theft was attributed to youth who couldn't afford the \$400 state mandated driver's education course.

YAP staff provide transportation necessary to help the young person and his/her family make scheduled appointments and access resources within the community. It is important to note, however, that we also work to identify other transportation supports that can be sustained after our involvement with the youth and family.

YAP met with a family at risk of losing their children to placement due to multiple absences from school. It was the middle of a snowy winter and we discovered in talks with the family that one of the children had to walk two miles to reach their bus stop. Ultimately YAP was able to use flexible funds to purchase a snow mobile for the family. This helped the family get the children to the bus stop and prevented charges of educational neglect.



Rural areas typically have fewer formal services and social resources than urban or suburban areas. Access to health care and mental health services in particular is extremely difficult in many rural areas. YAP strengthens families through connecting them with local, accessible systems of support that builds pro-social connections to the community. Creative supports and services include:

- **YAP services occur in the young person’s home, school and local community.** Though YAP has an office within the local community, our services are not center-based. Instead of requiring families to come to us, our Advocates go to them, meeting them at the times most needed and places most convenient.
- **Local “Care Teams” (Family Teams)** include professionals, family and extended family members, “fictive kin”, neighbors and others who agree to take a role in supporting the youth/family. Each team is unique to the needs, skills and interests of the youth and family. Staff bring the team members together, help negotiate conflicts, and create pro-social opportunities to learn new skills and to give back to the community.

With no psychiatric care facilities within 100 miles of a family’s home, YAP leaders forged a partnership with local general practitioners to consult with psychiatric specialists in a neighboring state that helped inform doctors of the psychiatric needs and medications to best treat youth with mental health challenges.

## Rural Culture

Rural communities have distinct individual values and norms. Some even have their own language. Residents may be leery of if not hostile towards outsiders, particularly representatives of Child Welfare and other governmental systems. Building lasting trust relationships is an essential part of YAP’s approach.

**YAP connects families with “Advocates” who share their rural culture.** YAP recruits a mix of professionals and paraprofessionals (“GED’s to Ph.D.’s”) using a zip code recruitment strategy. YAP Advocates are “natural helpers” matched with youth who share similar interests, ethnic background, and language. Advocates have a strong awareness of the resources, both formal and informal, that exist within the community. Advocates often become liaisons between schools and families, helping them understand each other and work together to develop creative ways to meet their mutual needs. YAP also helps youth participate in local activities such as hunting, fishing and trapping that help connect them to the community. Advocates are available 24/7.

YAP received a referral to work with a family who spoke a language indigenous to that community. None of our existing staff knew the language, so we scoured the community and ultimately recruited a local Logger who spoke the language to work 10 hours per week with the family.