



Chicago, Illinois

Making Quality a Full-Time Job

How one of the country's largest YMCAs is expanding its efforts to improve services to kids.



Staffers are improving their face time with kids.

Until recently, the job that Ashley Nazarak just started at the YMCA of Metro Chicago didn't exist. Then the leaders at the Y decided that improving program quality meant dedicating someone to the task full time.

So they took an unusual step: They created a position to oversee program quality improvement across the Y's sprawling system of 25 member centers, five camps and hundreds of extension sites. Which is why Nazarak is now senior manager of program quality and evaluation.

Improving program quality meant dedicating someone to the task full time

"Our team's long-term goal is to measure the Y's impact, and we recognize that quality programs and youth outcomes go hand in hand," says Christina Krasov, vice president of performance improvement. It's a rare and significant move, says Joe Bertoletti, senior manager of field services at the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. "It shows the staff that the organization is committed to helping them improve the quality of their work," he says. "And that it will put up the resources to make that happen."

Here is how and why the Chicago YMCA took that step.

Lessons from the Pilot

As part of an effort to increase the quality of employee practices across-the-board, the Y last year contracted with the Weikart Center (a division of the Forum for Youth Investment) to run a pilot of the Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI). The YPQI follows a continuous improvement cycle of assessing program performance, planning improvements based on data from the assessments and carrying out those plans through staff training.

Step one was implementing the Youth Program Quality Assessment (Youth PQA), a tool that gives OST providers feedback about their instructional quality and workforce development needs. The observational assessment produces scores for everything from safety and skill building to group interactions and youth engagement in program design.



The Y carried out the assessments at 11 sites under the leadership of Susan Kennedy, senior vice president of human services, who tapped Nazarak – a community schools program manager – to guide the effort. “It quickly became a huge component of my job,” Nazarak says. “It was very important that I focus on data and quality improvement for all of the pilot sites.”

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Among the results of the YPQA: Staffers were generally delivering safe and supportive programs that produced emotionally safe, welcoming environments.

However, youth did not have much voice in creating or selecting content, and they didn’t have time to reflect on their program experiences.

The sites created customized improvement plans that led to about 370 hours of targeted staff development. For example, the Y provided YPQI Methods workshops on “youth voice” and “planning and reflection.” Staff were assigned to workshops based on their sites’ improvement plans, but were encouraged to also attend any workshops they wished.

“It’s a ‘win-win’ going through the YPQI process,” said Maria Franco, program coordinator for one of the Y’s Children’s Services programs. “Staff gain knowledge and skills to apply to their engagement with the children, children are happy to participate [in programming], parents are happy with the quality of services, and our program excels.”



Scaling up

The Y found the process so powerful that it decided to take it to scale across its entire system. “The YPQI process requires complete dedication in order to see cultural change and lasting results,” says Krasov, the vice president of performance improvement.

The agency created the position for program quality and evaluation, named Nazarak to the post and put the job in the Performance Improvement office, which oversees improvements across the agency in various areas – such as finances and organizational efficiency, as well as direct services.

Nazarak explains that for the quality improvement work to fulfill its potential among the Y’s 600 full-time employees, “I have to give it the support that it needs.”

The YPQI expansion will roll out in stages; the number of sites will just about double this year.

“We live in a world where data matters,” Krasov says. “Our objective is to ensure that it is not just data for data’s sake, but that the data translates in to meaningful decisions for our staff.”

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Learn more about the YPQI and the Youth PQA at www.cypq.org/ypqi.

The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan action tank that forges innovative ideas, strategies and partnerships to strengthen solutions for young people and those who care about them. www.forumfyi.org.

The David P. Weikart Center, a division of the Forum for Youth Investment, empowers education and human service leaders to adapt, implement and bring to scale best-in-class, research-validated quality improvement systems to advance child and youth development. www.cypq.org.

Ready by 21 is a set of innovative strategies developed by the Forum for Youth Investment that helps communities and states improve the odds that all children and youth will be ready for college, work and life. www.readyby21.org.