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What are some considerations for employing and supporting youth peer mentors in child welfare?

Peer support is a recognized therapeutic model for recovery and well-being that was first developed and used in the 1970s in the mental health and substance use disorder systems. Since that time, child protection agencies have also discovered the value of offering parent peer support: voluntary advocacy, mentoring, and coaching by a fellow parent with past child welfare system experience.

Peer support for young people impacted by the child welfare system is equally important. Youth peer mentorship should be part of a <u>healing-centered, culturally</u> responsive system of supports, and can include one-to-one support with goal setting or advocacy in court and team meetings. It can also include group support such as in-person or online support groups or other peer-run services, trainings, and events. Young adults sometimes provide peer mentorship as one part of a larger youth voice role that may include training and technical assistance to professional staff, participation on organizational or jurisdictional advisory committees, outreach, and policy advocacy.

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While some of the principles guiding effective parent partnership also apply to youth mentorship, the unique developmental needs of youth require special considerations, particularly concerning hiring, training, supervision, and professional development.¹

Benefits of youth peer support

Evidence of the benefits and effectiveness of young adult peer support for youth transitioning from foster care to independence is limited. Peer support staff often work as part of larger support teams with other professional staff, which makes their impact difficult to isolate and quantify. The value of peer support more broadly has been well established, however, particularly in mental health and substance use recovery. Benefits cited in a <u>2013 literature</u> <u>review</u> conducted by Youth MOVE include "changing the culture of mental health from illness and disability to health and ability" and inspiring hope and the belief that recovery is possible.

Some research has shown that peer mentoring programs can promote educational success for youth in or transitioning from foster care. <u>Findings from a limited</u> <u>clinical trial</u> suggest that the Better Futures model can increase high school completion, participation in higher education, and quality of life for youth in foster care with mental health conditions. A recent evaluation of the Bridging Success program at Arizona State University (see Jurisdictional Examples, below) showed a positive impact on both first-year retention and degree completion rates for those who participated, compared to students who were eligible but elected not to participate.

Peer support confers <u>benefits for the people</u> <u>providing the service</u> as well as those receiving

it, including increasing self-esteem, confidence, and personal recovery. "Even though being a youth advocate can be triggering," notes Diane Ramirez, Youth Advocate Program director, West Coast Children's Clinic, "there's also a lot of healing that happens in these roles."

Considerations for employing youth peer mentors

Organizational preparation

The employment of youth peer mentors is one of several ways that a child protection agency may operationalize <u>authentic youth engagement</u>. Before launching any peer mentoring program, agencies must examine their purpose and goals for youth engagement, learn what it means to truly <u>value youth</u> <u>partners</u>, and prepare to share power with young adults in a true spirit of partnership, from program conceptualization to implementation to ongoing CQI and monitoring over time.

Young people should be engaged in the development of a peer mentorship program from the outset, through advisory groups and/or co-design sessions with youth, advocates, and professional staff. Local peer-run organizations, including chapters of <u>Youth MOVE</u> <u>National</u> or <u>Foster Youth in Action</u>, may be able to

Youth peer mentorship is important in the child welfare system because, unfortunately, the system is inherently rooted in experiences of broken trust between youth and adults. Knowing this, we have a responsibility as a system, as service providers, and as change agents, to rebuild trust with young people. When you ask young people who they are most likely to trust, it is individuals who have walked in similar shoes. Peer support creates a mechanism for those who have felt and absorbed, with all their senses, the adversities and difficulties of the child welfare system to let young people still in the system know that they're not alone, and their pain can be turned into purpose. provide additional support or guidance. Create frequent, ongoing opportunities for youth peers to provide periodic feedback directly to leadership about the developing program and any other organizational and systemic issues that may impact its implementation.

Hiring

Peer mentors are most relatable when they share as many characteristics as possible with the young people they serve, including race and ethnicity, community background, education, income, and other life experiences. Justine Cheung of ASU's Bridging Success program refers to this as hiring "like peers, not near-peers." For example, she has noticed that since hiring peer mentors from the full gender spectrum, engagement and participation of young adult males has increased significantly. Bravehearts' Executive Director Jessica Grimm notes that where mentors come from is important. "We need to be going into the places where our young people are being served. This not only rebuilds trust but also inspires young people to believe that they, too, can overcome challenges and be successful."

Peer mentorship program representatives also shared that, with the exception of candidates' lived experience, flexibility is key. It is important to thoroughly investigate hiring requirements, including those dictated by federal or state grants and/or necessitated by insurance policies, to determine which can be adapted for this population. Whenever possible, programs should seek to remove requirements for diplomas, degrees, credentials, and licenses, or allow candidates to work toward credentials while on the job. In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, for example, incoming <u>Youth</u> <u>Support Partners</u> are granted six months after hire to obtain a driver's license and vehicle, and support is available. Offer flexible scheduling, for example, with a combination of in-person work and online training.

For many programs, although the requirements are flexible, interviewing is extensive and rigorous. Current peer mentors can play important roles in the recruitment and vetting process. Their involvement can include staffing recruitment tables at community events, hosting informal information sessions, leading panel interviews and role-playing scenarios. Alameda County asks finalists to participate in a hands-on project with current peer mentors to assess their approach to teamwork and handling stress. Administrative staff generally make the final decision about hiring, but feedback from peers is often weighted heavily.

Coaching and support

Young adult peer mentors frequently require support with issues both related and unrelated to the job. Much like the youth they serve, they may experience unstable housing, unhealthy relationships, trauma symptoms, and mental health concerns. On the job, they may find themselves advocating for a young person who is experiencing something very similar to what they went through (or are still going through), working with a social worker with whom they had a past negative experience, or strongly disagreeing with a court decision.

Support for youth peer mentors begins with extensive orientation to the role. It is important to ensure young adults understand the system from a new perspective and become familiar with the terms they will hear in meetings. Peer mentors receive training and coaching on people skills, professionalism, and life skills. Ongoing supervision is also a critical consideration, and many

Organizations are often in a rush to bring young people in, but if they haven't done the necessary preparation, it can be harmful in the long run. You have to take time to ensure the staff and agency are set up to support young people's involvement. Being able to meet young people where they are is important.

— JASMINE BOATWRIGHT, YOUTH MOVE program leaders emphasize a highly supportive, nonpunitive coaching model. "Often adults look at supervising young people the same way they look at supervising adults, but it's very different," says Youth MOVE's Boatwright. Policies and procedures may need to be adapted to the unique needs and situations presented by each new cohort of youth peers.

Peer mentors benefit from support not just from their supervisors but from one another. In Allegheny County, Youth Support Partner units function as a family – supporting each other in formal and informal ways, and celebrating both professional successes and personal milestones together. Fun is another element frequently mentioned by those who work with young adult peer mentors. Team building, group celebrations, and other recreational activities can provide some balance to the heaviness of committee and advocacy work. Ramirez notes, "It's important to find the right admin staff who are committed to the work and who truly enjoy and can have fun with the advocates."

Professional development

Youth peer mentors, by definition, cannot remain in their roles forever. Most will age out of the work by around age 25. Programs must be thinking about where youth will go next and how they can support their future career success. Bravehearts' Grimm stresses, "We do a great job of getting young people and families into positions where they can represent their communities and peers. But do we give them careers, or do we give them positions? Is it about filling a position or positioning the future?" Te Jay of Youth MOVE National recommends dedicating approximately 25% of a youth peer mentor's role to professional development. Other tips include:

- Fill supervisor and manager positions on the team by promoting youth mentors whenever possible.
- Allow peer mentors to attend trainings in other units of the organization or county to build their credentials.
- Encourage and provide time for peer mentors to work on their resumes and apply and interview for other jobs.
- Offer to provide references and write letters of recommendation.
- Help peer mentors apply for college and find scholarships.
- Ask peer mentors, "If you weren't doing this, what would you want to be doing?" Help them explore career opportunities beyond social work.
- Work with partner agencies or organizations to identify roles that require the skills peer mentors are developing. Encourage partners to remove education requirements or other barriers that might prevent young people from applying.
- Engage young adult peer mentors in other, related organizational activities. For example, Bravehearts is hiring young adults to perform data collection and teaching them about research and evaluation concepts. Grimm notes, "Our mentors of today could be our researchers of tomorrow."

It is essentially a job with 'training wheels.' Without those training wheels, a lot of the youth advocates wouldn't last very long. It's important to strike a balance between holding them accountable and having high expectations for them, while giving them all the support they need to be successful.

— DIANE RAMIREZ,

DIRECTOR OF YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAM (YAP), WEST COAST CHILDREN'S CLINIC, ALAMEDA COUNTY

Funding

Identifying sustainable funding is critical to building a program that provides consistent support to both the young person and the peer support partner. For information about funding peer support programs, see <u>How do some jurisdictions fund parent</u> <u>partner programs?</u>

Jurisdictional examples

Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) Youth Support

Partners (YSPs) are young adults with lived experience in child welfare, behavioral health, or juvenile justice, funded by the Department of Human Services to promote youth voice and enhance the department's engagement with youth ages 14 to 21. YSPs work alongside other staff to help youth identify and achieve their own goals. The YSP program, one of the <u>largest</u> and most successful peer mentor programs serving child welfare-involved youth, reports that 90% of children offered a mentor accept YSP services.

Bravehearts (New York) is a youth-led nonprofit organization focused on empowering young adults who have experienced the child welfare system to become active and authentic leaders in their own lives as they transition into adulthood. Bravehearts is organizationally mentored by The Children's Village to ensure sustainability while it works toward financial independence without compromising its program model and values. Bravehearts employs young adults to provide individual mentoring; advocacy for youth at court hearings, treatment meetings, and discharge meetings; and more. Bravehearts' BraveLife Intervention training manual also contains a wealth of information about recruiting and training young adult staff. According to Executive Director Grimm, everything at Bravehearts is focused on rebuilding trust for young adults. This is just as important for those who serve as mentors as for those receiving services. Supervision involves multiple layers of support, with individuals with lived experience serving in supervisory as well as direct service roles. Recently, Grimm says, they have come to think of themselves as an "anti-abandonment organization," employing intensive, creative problem-solving with patience, compassion, and options when a peer mentor is struggling to meet

organizational expectations. Termination is viewed as an "absolute last resort."

The Alameda County (California) Youth Advocate

Program (YAP) was launched in February 2007. Today the program benefits from a close partnership between privately owned West Coast Children's Clinic, which manages the day-to-day operations, and the County's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). YAP supports an average of 12 youth advocate fellows at a time, including two senior youth advocates. Fellows are hired between the ages of 18 and 23. During this 3-year professional development fellowship, advocates are full-time employees of West Coast Children's Clinic, earning a living wage and benefits. West Coast demonstrates a strong commitment to the fellows' professional development. Youth advocates devote approximately 20 hours per week to DCFS work, which includes direct advocacy for youth in care as well as other project and committee work. Fellows may dedicate up to 10 paid hours per week to pursuing individualized professional development goals, including attending school or completing homework, participating in internships, or exploring other careers. In their third year, fellows receive an additional 5 hours per week for "advancement planning," such as putting together a resume, obtaining a driver's license, or attending job interviews or one-to-one coaching. In 2021-22, 100 percent of those surveyed agreed that the fellowship was supporting them to reach their professional and educational goals. Program alumni have gone on to receive bachelor's and master's degrees, pursuing careers both within and beyond the field of social work (and one former youth advocate now serves as a member of the program's admin team).

Arizona State University launched its Bridging

Success program in 2015 to support young adults formerly in foster care who were taking advantage of a state tuition waiver. The program is jointly funded through private grants and in-kind support from the university. Its program coordinator provides outreach and recruitment, enrollment support, and year-round coaching. Recently, the program added a full-time, dedicated therapist to provide clinical mental health support. Approximately three peer mentors support the program each year. A large part of their job is helping to plan and implement the Early Start program, a weeklong orientation and relationship-building opportunity for students new to campus. During fall and spring semesters, the peer mentors are expected to maintain informal relationships with mentees through social media, help connect them to university resources as needed, and attend occasional in-person events. Mentors receive a stipend of \$500 per semester and regular training on topics such as boundary setting, leadership building, and relevant issues. Any student who participated in Early Start and maintains a GPA of at least 2.5 is eligible to be considered for the peer mentor role. The program does not prescreen candidates, instead using interviews as an opportunity to check in with students and provide interviewing practice. In survey responses, students express feeling supported by the program and connected to others at ASU as a result of their participation. An <u>evaluation of</u> <u>the program</u> is published, and a resource manual will be available soon.

To learn more, visit <u>Questions from the field</u> at <u>Casey.org</u>.

1 This brief was informed by interviews with Jessica Grimm, executive director, Bravehearts, on November 9, 2022; Te Jay McGrath, program coordinator, and Jasmine Boatwright, youth programs coordinator, Youth MOVE, on January 31, 2023; Avis Grayson Johnson, child welfare supervisor, Alameda County, and Diane Ramirez, director of Youth Advocate Program (YAP), West Coast Children's Clinic, January 18, 2023; and Justine Cheung, Bridging Success Program coordinator, Arizona State University, January 19, 2023.

