



STRATEGY BRIEF

# SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

## 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 [healing-centered, culturally 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.

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.<sup>1</sup>







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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,

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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 [evaluation of the program](#) is published, and a resource manual will be available soon.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

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.

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