

# Implementing the Peer Support Specialist Role: Providing Direct, Individualized Support in a Local Program



**T**his information brief provides an example of how one locally-initiated program has implemented the Peer Support Specialist role for youth and young adults with serious mental health conditions. The brief covers aspects of training, coaching, supervision, role definition and financing; and describes challenges and solutions.

## Overview of the Program

The Youth Empowerment Support (YES!) Program provides opportunities and trainings for community and system transformation as well as direct support, groups, and leadership opportunities for young people at risk of, in, or emancipating out of system services. YES! began in 2007 in Auburn, CA. The program was originally funded by a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, but with the support of Placer County, YES! was able to find more sustainable funding through the Mental Health Services

Act and Wraparound funding (state legislation known as SB-163 and often referred to as the “millionaire’s tax”). The YES! program is part of an organization named Whole Person Learning, which provides support and guidance in areas such as navigating policies, budgeting, grants, and human resources.

YES! hires staff that are 18 years or older and:

*“...no longer receive any system services from Children’s System of Care, so that would be like child welfare or probation. We also state*

*that they need to have a strong work ethic; be dependable, flexible, and able to adapt to daily changes and challenges. That's mainly because of the atmosphere we work in and every day they come in and it's something different. They also need to have knowledge of and ability to learn positive youth development, strengths-based practice and cultural competence; the ability to work cooperatively and decisively with individuals and groups with different educational, economic, cultural and racial backgrounds; and...also must pass a criminal background check and drug screening."*

Currently, there are two full-time (including the Program Manager) and one part-time staff, all with lived experience. Staff are trained in Motivational Interviewing, suicide prevention, and cultural competency, and they also receive training from California's Youth Development Institute. Other training is provided as needed, and county and community partners provide affordable trainings as well as online resources. YES! staff have prior experience with and knowledge of the various systems YES! works with. These include experiences with the child welfare, juvenile justice, and/or mental health systems. The Program Manager, along with the Director of Whole Person Learning, co-

supervise the Youth Coordinators. The use of two supervisors ensures a collaborative, team approach that provides support for different aspects of the job.

The youth referred to this program come from various sources. In the beginning, the youth were referred through county services. As the program has gained a positive reputation, though, many youth are self-referring or referring their peers. The youth served are 12-26 years old. YES! is dedicated to providing individualized services that do not replicate support that is already available within the community.

*"We try to find other resources to meet [the youth's] need and link that young person up with [a resource], but if there isn't a service or support in the community or county that would meet that need then we try to fill in that gap. We'd also bring that information back to the county and community through various meetings that our coordinators are in, leadership meetings or system change projects, and so we're constantly trying to loop our feedback from doing direct support in the community and our own lived experience back to the county and the community to make improvement."*

## Role of Youth Coordinators

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YES! Youth Coordinators provide individualized support for youth in three phases. The first phase, called the "intro phase," involves the Youth Coordinator getting to know a youth, developing trust, becoming familiar with the youth's culture, and focusing on what the youth hopes to achieve during their time together. During this phase, the Youth Coordinator is able to learn what resources will best suit the youth and what level of support will help the youth succeed.

The next phase, "intensive" or "periodic support," really focuses on supporting youth and connecting them with various community resources as well as assisting them in learning how to navigate systems independently.

*"So for example if a youth comes into our program and they're homeless, and let's say they were adopted and they don't qualify for certain programs or let's say they never entered the system but they bounce around,*

*they don't have any family support and now they're homeless. We would have to do a lot more work with that individual than, say, with somebody who comes in and maybe qualifies for a lot of services because they grew up in the system and emancipated out. So we would link one person up with services that would be periodic, and the other homeless youth – we would be trying to meet their basic needs, working multiple days trying to meet their needs."*

The final phase, the "transition phase," involves evaluating the services that have been provided and checking in with the youth to find out if they have achieved what they wanted during their time at YES!. Also, the final phase is a time for making sure the youth have the resources they need to continue to move forward with

their goals, and for celebration for what has been accomplished.

Youth Coordinators also sit in on meetings such as Individual Education Planning, Placement Planning, and Family Team Meetings. In these settings, the Youth Coordinator provides information to the family members and the youth so that they are prepared and know what to expect. The Youth Coordinators encourage youth to advocate for themselves, but in instances when perhaps the youth is not being heard or is not ready to speak up, they will support the youth in whatever manner is most comfortable for the youth. It is the hope of the Youth Coordinators that this modeling will further encourage the youth to advocate for themselves. The Youth Coordinator is continuously working with the youth to improve existing skills and build new ones.

## Challenges

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As with most programs with Youth Coordinator roles, there have been challenges to creating and sustaining the role. In the beginning, there was quite a bit of stigma from adult professionals. Because YES! hires youth who have experience with systems such as child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice, some staff were not very supportive of hiring them for professional roles.

*"There's a lot of stigma around our work and breaking down those barriers in both our county and community has been a challenge at times and I always say the only reasons we have sustainable staff is because people come to this job with the passion that they want to make a change. The bad experiences you've had are going to come up in this job for sure because you're working with the county and seeing its flaws, but you also get to see the strengths... I think when people go through*

*this system and they first take a job trying to work on system transformation, they come in with their own bias and stigma towards the system so it goes both ways."*

Additionally, there is a need to support the Youth Coordinators during their own time of transition into a professional role. The Youth Coordinators are valuable because of their experiences, but these experiences may also mean the Youth Coordinators require extra support from supervisors.

The YES! Program Manager and the Director of Whole Person Learning emphasize the importance of providing a safe workplace that encourages debriefing. They also encourage Youth Coordinators to participate in trainings and community relationship building in order to build their skills and relationships and continue their growth as advocates and professionals.

*“Our staff – we come with our lived experience and we may, to some degree, have work history we bring with us, but we’re not necessarily coming with a degree so I think it’s really important to have an employer who will find*

*those resources for you. I think that’s important – to have an employer who is willing to find those things for your program and support you in that.”*

## Future Work

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Many of the youth who have received support from YES! have voiced a desire to have a drop-in center where they can socialize and access a variety of resources in one place. YES! will be looking into possibilities to make this a reality. Currently, YES! will be launching a cloud plat-

form where youth can store their vital documents and have them all in one safe location called HealthShack. This is especially important for youth who move often or do not have stable housing.

## Acknowledgment

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Thanks to YES! for providing information about their program for this peer support case study.

## Funded by

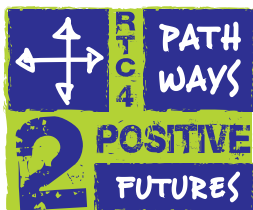
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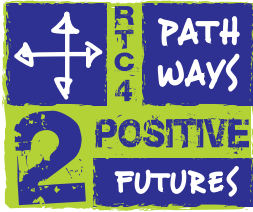
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# Implementing the Peer Support Specialist Role: Youth Peer Support in Wraparound

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**T**his information brief provides an example of how one state has implemented and supported the Peer Support Specialist role for youth with serious mental health conditions. The brief covers aspects of training, coaching, supervision, role definition and financing; and describes a series of challenges and solutions.



## Overview of the Program

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The Youth and Family Training Institute (YFTI) was created in 2007 to bring the High Fidelity Wraparound (HFW) Planning Process to Pennsylvania. YFTI is funded by the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Community Care Behavioral Health and the University of Pittsburgh/Department of Psychiatry of Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic. YFTI is responsible for training, coaching, credentialing and continuous quality improvement of the HFW process for county contracted agencies who support the HFW workforce. The training, coaching, credentialing and continuous quality improvement is provided by YFTI at no cost

to the HFW workforce. Counties that elect to implement the HFW process for youth and families currently provide start up funding for the agencies. HFW in Pennsylvania is funded by Medicaid using the Joint Planning Teams, which are administrative activities of the Behavioral Health Managed Care Organizations. The population of focus is 8-18 year olds and their families who have complex behavioral challenges; involvement in multiple systems, such as juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health, addiction services and education; and risk of placement, or current placement in, out-of-home facilities.

## Development of the YSP Role in Pennsylvania

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Young people who were involved in the process of developing the Youth and Family Training Institute participated in a discussion regarding staffing. At that time, staffing for HFW consisted of a Coach, a Facilitator and a Family Support Partner. When the youth heard about the role of the Family Support Partner they wanted something similar for themselves and other youth – someone to support them, advocate with them, help them find their voices, and help them connect to others. As a result, youth were part of the development of the original role of Youth Support Partner (YSP). Over the next few years, YFTI, along with early HFW implementer counties and workforce members, developed the training around skills essential for a YSP

within the PA model. YSPs are now working in all but one of the HFW implementer counties!

Youth Support Partners are coached and supervised by the agency in which they are hired. YFTI has recently hired a Youth Support Partner Specialist to assist in coaching, training and credentialing the HFW workforce within the county provider agencies. In addition, the Youth Support Partner Specialist has quarterly check in calls with the YSPs to discuss strengths within the work, issues, concerns or suggestions. This call also allows for coaching support if needed. YFTI provides ongoing learning in several formats, including webcasts, online trainings and yearly HFW Workforce Day.

## Role of Youth Support Partners

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Youth Support Partners offer a range of support to youth. Similar to the Family Support Partner, the YSPs meet youth to engage them in the HFW process, gather information from the youth about their strengths and challenges, prepare them for team meetings and help them connect with other youth and with natural and community supports. The YSP supports youth in finding and expressing their voice and sharing their experiences. In preparing for team meetings, the youth and the YSP will discuss what to expect, who should be there and how the meeting will work. At times the YSP may speak for youth or co-present with them until the youth are ready to do it on their own. In situations where youth may feel outnumbered or be reluctant to speak about their needs, the YSP is there to add another youth voice and advocate on their behalf.

*“[Youth Support Partners] help youth to think through what they want to say and practice what they want to say and help them find their voice so that they can share it in a meaningful way. It’s surprising how many kids actually*

*want to share their voices, they don’t want to just sit there silently. They want to be able to communicate what they need, but they don’t think anybody would want to listen. The youth support partners help them see that others do want to listen and are ready – and they will support them if people aren’t listening, too. So, it’s an added voice to support and strengthen the voice the youth have. Not every kid wants to do it, not every kid is ready for that. But, many of them respond. It’s amazing. Amazing. It’s one of the strongest elements of this model: the peer support.”*

The goal is to help the youth develop their own abilities to advocate effectively for themselves, both in meetings and in the community.

The YSP will also work with the youth and help them find community resources that they may have been unaware of beforehand or disconnected from in the past. The YSP can accompany the youth as they navigate the community and various service systems, leading to confi-



dence in doing so independently. Youth Support Partners work to introduce the youth to others that can assist during the transition from youth to adult services. However, this does not mean that the YSP severs connections with the youth once they reach a certain age. As the Director of the Institute states:

*“There’s a lot of check-in that happens after people transition out of the process. If the youth wants it, the YSP can, and does, check in by texting or by phone. You know, catch up, check in. You’re not just ‘done’ with the process unless you choose to be.”*

Youth Support Partners are also looking for youth that may benefit from and be interested in leadership development. The Youth Support Partner Specialist and the Youth Involvement Specialists within the PA System of Care Partnership are developing training around this topic so that youth can become leaders at the local and state level as well.

Most importantly, perhaps, is the role modeling that goes on during these times. The YSPs learn to share their personal stories in a positive manner that demonstrates how to successfully navigate systems, work on recovery, and effectively advocate for and communicate needs. The youth are able to see the YSP as someone who shares experiences with them, is a similar age, and is working to advocate for their success. Success becomes less of an abstract notion and much more tangible with a YSP. Youth may be exiting from residential programs where many daily activities were done for them, such as making a doctor’s appointment. This basic skill can seem overwhelming to youth who are moving between services and possibly living situations, especially if they have never done it before. A YSP can work with the youth on gaining this skill, having experienced similar issues, without the youth fearing embarrassment.

## Challenges

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For many YSPs, this is their first work experience. Qualifications for this position call for personal experience in systems and being the general age of a young adult. The stress of a first job, along with that of lived experience within the system, may need to be addressed. The YSPs may participate in creating their own wellness plan so that their teams are aware of times when they may need more support. This, as well as other activities, has decreased turnover within the role, as has meeting with the team members and discussing ways to support and assist YSPs in succeeding in the workplace.

The program is still relatively new, but successful. A question that is now coming up is what to do when a YSP ages out of the role. The agencies are looking at ways to support YSPs and help them move into other positions as they

grow older. The Institute is exploring ways to award college credit for the trainings the YSPs participate in and to offer sustainable compensation. The experience and skills the YSPs gain are transferable to other jobs.

Another challenge is that some candidates for the YSP have a criminal history. Because the HFW teams work with youth who also have juvenile justice histories, youth with justice involvement are especially needed. Current agency policies may prohibit hiring these youth due to mandatory background checks. The Institute is currently working with various counties and the state to address this issue.

Though many agencies and providers have integrated YSPs, the generational aspect still requires flexibility. Youth Support Partners are usually aged between 18 and 26 years old.

Young people are gaining experience in a professional role that takes time to develop, and their colleagues must adjust to this learning curve. Time management, professional dress,

and professional communication are skills that are learned on the job and with the assistance of all team members.

## Conclusion

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Agencies have embraced the YSP position due to the valuable insight and unique skill set YSPs bring to the team. These positions are seen as integral to the success of the HFW team meetings as well as the success of the youth transitioning.

*“When we first started, our ratio was for every one hundred families, you had one coach,*

*eight facilitators, four family support partners and two youth support partners. We quickly learned that youth support partners are in demand, so as soon as people found out what they could do and what their role was on the team, we had to up the ratio to be equal to the family support partner. It’s been a wonderful addition. I can’t imagine trying to do this process without it.”*

## Acknowledgment

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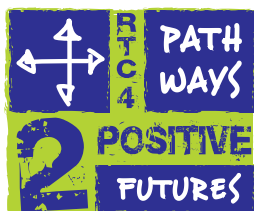
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