



YOUTH MOVE CHANGE INITIATIVE

**Understanding Agency Barriers to
Accessing Financing Pathways for
Youth Peer Support Programs
(Full Report)**

**YOUTH
MOVE
NATIONAL**

The Youth MOVE Change Initiative Fellowship

YMCI's Fellowship Program provided an opportunity for three LGBTQIA2S+ and/or BIPOC young leaders to create and lead projects to further inform the development of the youth peer workforce at all levels. Fellows met with YMN leadership weekly, individually and as a group, to further develop their efforts and to provide ongoing implementation support. Fellows' responsibilities included creating actionable guidance to the field, joining panels and presentations as subject matter experts, and facilitating focus groups for youth and young adults with lived experience. These three fellows were a combination of Black, Immigrant, and multiracial; and two disclosed LGBTQIA2S+ identities. Each fellow received \$30,000 for their time and commitment to this project.

Summary

The purpose of this project was to better understand the barriers agencies face in accessing financing pathways for youth peer support (YPS) programs. While it was initially hypothesized that these barriers would be extrinsic, centered more on the lack of transparency by funders in terms of the financing pathways they offer, the project found that many of those involved in the YPS sector attribute this barrier to intrinsic factors which stem from a lack of transparency within agencies on finances to their employees.

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Background

Peer support first emerged as a valued mental health treatment pathway in the 1920s and has since been applied widely in the field. YPS centers interpersonal relationship building through shared lived experiences and offers youth the opportunity to engage with an individual with similar experiences as a part of their support network. The traditional means in which this treatment is funded is through Medicaid. This funding pathway is offered by individual states and partially subsidized by the federal government. Due to its dependence on state discretion, Medicaid financing can vary from state to state.

A consistent drawback to this source of funding exists across states and that is the fee for service model. This model consists of state Medicaid agencies setting rates to bill states for specific services. The drawback lies within the billing of specific services. For instance, while face-to-face meetings may be covered, text messages may not be. Thus, there is inflexibility when this funding model is implemented which falls hardest on those receiving support and on youth peers themselves. For this reason, agencies have continued to explore pathways to funding outside of Medicaid which offer more flexibility in the implementation of their YPS programs. Such sources of funding include Global Commitment Waivers, Block Grant Dollars, federal/state grants, funding from non-governmental organizations, philanthropic partners, and donations. Although an abundance of these financing pathways have been implemented by many agencies across the country, many agencies still rely heavily on Medicaid funds due these other sources not being the easiest to attain. Herein, this research aims to explore the barriers agencies face in obtaining both these more flexible funding options and funds in general.

Research Questions & Hypothesis

Research Question: What factors can be ascribed to the barriers that agencies face in securing sustainable financing pathways for youth peer support programs?

Hypothesis: Barriers to funding can be attributed to a lack of transparency on what pathways financiers offer.

Methods

Three focus groups were conducted over the course of two weeks on September 20th, 21st, and 28th. Focus groups aimed to convene individuals from three distinct backgrounds: those involved in the financing of YPS agencies, those involved in the YPS sector, and those who work with agencies who are not solely Medicaid financed. The focus groups ranged in attendance from 2-6 individuals, 30-45 minutes in length, and were facilitated by the author. While all focus groups were aimed at better understanding barriers to accessing funding, the intent was to have the topic of funding surface organically. Therefore, generic questions were asked initially and the questions were then tailored towards funding only after a participant had mentioned the topic in one of their responses.

Results

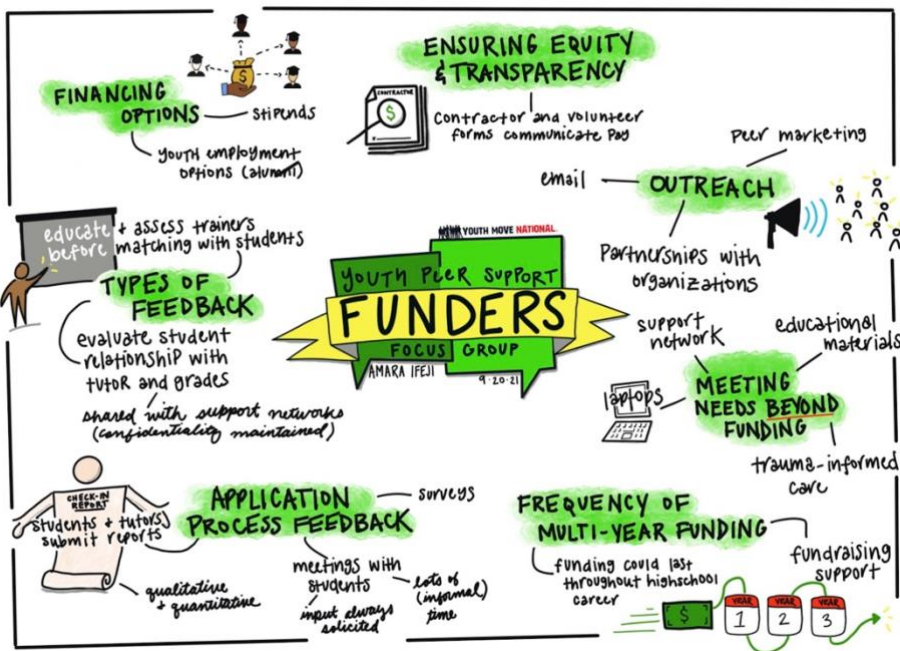


Figure 3.1: Graphic visualization of YPS Funders Focus Group (illustration credit: Juwon Harris)



Figure 3.2: Graphic visualization of YPS Sector Focus Group (illustration credit: Juwon Harris)

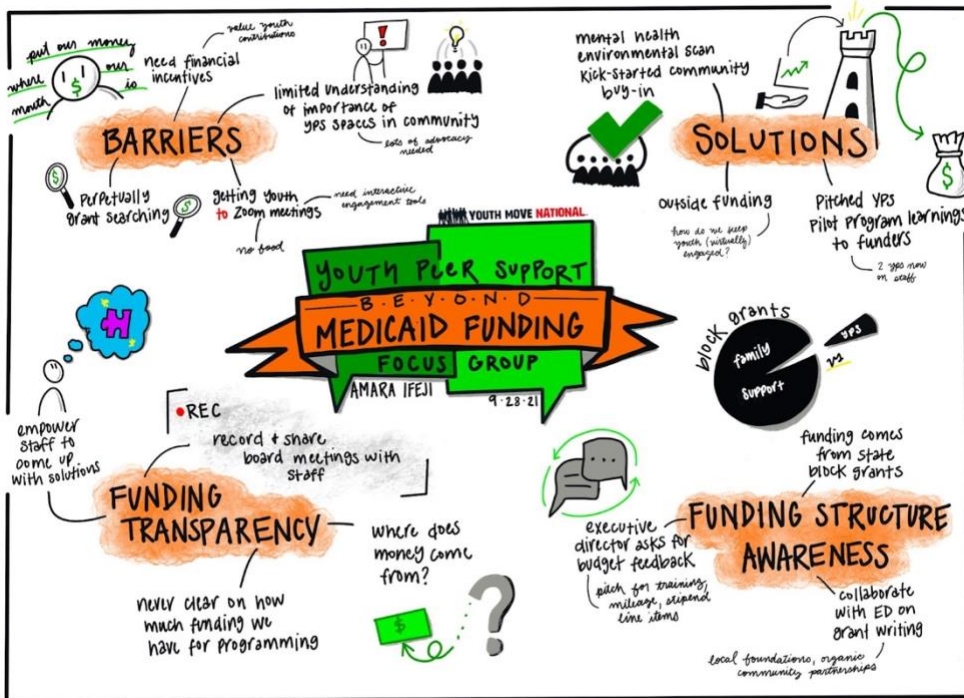


Figure 3.3: Graphic visualization of YPS Agencies Financed Beyond Medicaid Focus Group (illustration credit: Juwon Harris)

Discussion

Although the YPS Funders Focus Group was intended to convene individuals who work in or have been involved with agencies who finance YPS agencies, due to some miscommunication in the recruitment process, the participants did not in fact have backgrounds in the financing sector. Instead, the participants were mainly involved in the YPS sector. Given that the questions asked were tailored towards individuals involved in financing, the YPS Funders Focus Group data will not be analyzed. Instead, this discussion will focus solely on the YPS Sector and YPS Sector Financed Beyond Medicaid Focus Groups whose participants were involved in the intended sectors. Not having the financing sector perspective as a part of this project is a shortcoming of this project and a future project would aim to incorporate the perspectives of those funding YPS agencies.

When participants were asked if there are any barriers or challenges [they] have faced that do not directly relate to the programming [they]’re involved in, funding surfaced as the first challenge voiced in both the YPS Sector and YPS Sector Financed Beyond Medicaid Focus Groups. This challenge was one that was hypothesized would surface organically in the forefront of the conversations. When participants were further asked to identify the factors that could be attributed to this barrier persisting, many voiced how inaccessibility to financial information presented the biggest challenges to addressing this barrier to funding. These intrinsic, agency barriers dominated the conversations in both focus groups. In fact, only one participant attributed an extrinsic factor, the struggle to get “[funding] organizations to really understand the value of peer work”, to this barrier to funding persisting. This abundance of intrinsic agency barriers as opposed to extrinsic barriers is contrary to what was hypothesized. The responses of participants detailing this lack of agency transparency in finances will be detailed in the subsequent paragraph.

One participant responded in the YPS Sector Focus Group that they faced a lack of agency transparency in how youth stipends are disseminated while another in the YPS Sector Financed Beyond Medicaid Focus Group shared how development and budgetary information is “not something that’s readily shared at [their] agency”. Furthermore, participants in both focus groups suggested that although inquiries about agency finances were encouraged, they did not feel comfortable or equipped to ask these questions due to agency hierarchical dynamics and a lack of clarity on what information should be sought out. Additionally, one participant in the YPS Sector Financed Beyond Medicaid Focus Group detailed an instance where agency consensus was given to seek funds, but there were unclear procedural practices in place for exactly who should look for these grants to support novel programs. A participant in the same focus group followed up to voice they felt the same way and felt the pressure to “always have to kind of keep an eye out for any opportunities that can come, that can help sustain.” The participant went on to further describe how this time searching for funds are “hours [that] aren’t really captured otherwise in [their] job”. Moreover, for the

eight participants in both focus groups, only two responded yes to the question of whether you are familiar with your agency's funding structure and is this information something you have access to and that you can easily navigate? Moreover, of the two who did respond yes to the question of internal accessibility, both went on to attribute their access to the roles they played in agency development and both believed if they did not have those roles, they would also face these challenges to accessibility. For instance, a participant in the YPS Sector Focus Group voiced that the YPS workers they supervise do not have the same access to this information. Thus, it is evident from the focus group responses that those involved in the YPS sector face significant barriers to accessing agency financing information.

As it relates to accessibility to financing information, I argue it is more important that agencies themselves have procedures in place in which their employees can access financials. This is because if there is no transparency in this information, employees will not feel as though they can be a part of funding conversations, let alone seek these funding opportunities themselves. In other words, breaking down these barriers to accessing financial information is integral as it empowers those involved in the agency to feel as though they can take lead on securing the financial sustainability of the programs they are involved with. A participant in the YPS Sector Financed Beyond Medicaid Focus Group summarized this logic in a response:

“If an [agency] can even just empower by informing their employees, or whomever, [that] "this is [the budget] we're working with,' 'these are the parameters,' 'we might want to do...all those really great ideas that you have, but here's the reality, we actually only have this amount.”

Furthermore, many participants described how this lack of transparency to financial information impacts youth participation in YPS programs, but also the agency as a whole. One participant in the YPS Sector Focus Group described the cyclical nature of these lack of funds and lack of transparency: “if [there are no] donations to put into awareness efforts and stuff like that, then nobody even hears about our program to begin with. So it's just kind of this cycle that continues like that.” Another participant in the same focus group voiced that the agency they work with often has to make decisions on how to “allocate and...prioritize which students are going to be able to get the services” because the agency itself strictly operates on donations, which are often insufficient in covering demonstrated need.

Moreover, many participants also claimed that not only do lack of funds impede youth participation, but also the sustainability of the agency itself. Participants spoke to the instability of funds as a barrier. One participant voiced that “the second a grant runs out, then that could end the whole peer support program. And so I feel like there needs to be

some stability, or some guarantees that [funders] will continue to include transition-age youth and continue to do peer support outside of just grants.” The logic follows that without employees feeling empowered to seek funds due to inaccessibility to financial information, only a select few will actively seek funds. However, it is important that the seeking of funds is collaborative because, as with any situation, having more people involved will yield better results.

Conclusion

It was initially hypothesized that primarily extrinsic factors can be attributed to agency funding barriers. However, the focus group responses support the claim that these factors are primarily intrinsic, and stem from a lack of transparency within agencies on financial information. This deters many from feeling as though they can take part in securing funds. I assert that in order to overcome these barriers, there is a need for agencies to make financial information accessible and facilitate dialogue which empowers everyone involved in the agency to seek out funds which will lead to the sustainability of YPS programs. Furthermore, I propose that the following steps be taken in order to address these barriers:

- Internal, organizational teach-ins on development and finance
- Open dialogue about funding and development
- Invitation of programming staff to development meetings
- Evaluation metrics to gauge behavioral changes relating to the likelihood of self-seeking funding opportunities

References

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Simons, Dayana, et al. “Providing Youth and Young Adult Peer Support through Medicaid.” Aug. 2016.