



## YOUTH MOVE CHANGE INITIATIVE

### Understanding Agency Barriers to Accessing Financing Pathways for Youth Peer Support Programs (Summary)

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## 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.*

## Background

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**Author:** Amarachukwu Ifeji (she/her), a young person with lived experience, led a fellowship project with the following focus: Identify & analyze current funding for youth peer support

**Research Question:** What factors can be ascribed to the barriers 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.

A primary way by which new youth peer support (YPS) services are being funded is through Medicaid. This funding pathway is offered by individual states and partially subsidized by the federal government. Due to state discretion, Medicaid financing varies 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 units of service. The drawback lies within the set definition of the service and 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 peer providers 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. This research aims to explore the barriers agencies face in obtaining both these more flexible funding options and funds in general.

## Focus Areas

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Three focus groups were conducted over the course of two weeks in September 2021. 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 that are not solely Medicaid financed. 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.

*\*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.*

## Trending Themes

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1. Lack of transparency at agency and funder level
2. Lack of understanding of the value of YPS within the mental health service array
3. Sustainability
4. Organizational Culture
5. Workforce development and career pathways

## Addressing Barriers

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- **Increase Funding Transparency**

It is important that agencies have procedures in place that grants employees (including youth peer providers!) access to financials. 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. When agencies make financial information accessible, and facilitate dialogue around this information, everyone involved in the agency is empowered to seek out funds that will lead to the sustainability of YPS programs.

- **Invest in continuous professional development**

In many cases, youth peer providers move into youth engagement specialist or coordinator roles but then struggle to identify opportunities for continued professional growth. One way to address this issue is to set goals, such as establishing employee development plans and providing ongoing opportunities for youth learning, and building personal and professional networks. Supervisors of youth peer providers should engage in regular discussions about career options - encouraging exploration of careers inside and outside of the behavioral health system - to support young adult career mobility. To provide opportunities for advancement, employers of youth peer providers should invite them into leadership spaces and management positions and include them in decision-making around fiscal matters.

- **Increase funding and investment in youth peer services**

Given the close ties between research and funding, it is necessary to increase federal investment in both program evaluation and research of youth peer services. Building evidence of youth peer support will encourage long-term sustainability through increased funding from multiple sources.

- **Promote the value of peer support**

Agencies need organizational leaders who understand and value youth peer roles and want to educate staff and partners. This could include training centered on the importance of peer support and how the youth peer role differs from that of an adult peer or family support partner and a youth case manager. Working to make youth peer support more visible with funders, legislatures, policymakers, decision-makers, and other partners and recommended that efforts be made to educate, market, and build awareness of the role and benefits of peer support services. Ultimately, ensuring that staff and partners understand and value peer roles may prevent many of the challenges of integrating

- **Importance of organizational readiness**

Investments in building organizational readiness before implementing YPS programming is critical. The readiness of agencies to support youth peer providers is closely connected to the culture and infrastructure of the workplace (Simons, Hendricks, Lipper, Bergan, & Masselli, 2016). Despite the proliferation of peer programs, integrating peer providers into more traditional treatment settings continues to be a process rife with challenges for peers and employers alike (Harrison & Read, 2016).”

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