

YOUTH MOVE CHANGE INITIATIVE

The Youth MOVE Change Initiative Fellowship Model

YOUTH
MOVE
NATIONAL

Contributions to this article from Tymber Hudson, Shayn MacDonald, and Kristin Thorp.

A keystone to the Youth MOVE Change Initiative is our Youth Peer Fellowship Model. Here we explore why this fellowship model was developed and how it is structured.

Why did Youth MOVE establish a Fellowship for youth peers?



The YMCI Fellowship Model was established for several reasons. Creating a Fellowship specifically for youth peer providers is in alignment with both Youth MOVE's National Youth Peer Priority Agenda and our standing commitment to Generation NEXT (the practice of continually turning back to nurture the development of the next wave of youth leaders). Both call us to establish viable career pathways for youth with lived experience interested in working in the behavioral health workforce. Providing a Fellowship opportunity offers a tangible next professional step for young people who are effectively offering youth peer support and in such a way that it mirrors other careers where Fellowships are commonly offered. Career development steps like this are vital to the sustainability of the youth peer workforce. And the Fellowship program created a key youth voice opportunity for Youth MOVE to hear from, work with, and co-design with young people throughout YMCI efforts.

Young people applying for the Fellowship shared many hopes and dreams for what they would achieve out of this opportunity. These included:

- *“Creating an impact that will be lasting and impactful and easily passed to the next generation of change-makers” - **Nakiya***
- *“I believe this fellowship will allow me the opportunity to continue to advocate for those who have faced marginalization.” - **Amara***
- *“I want to help advance the supports for communities I’m a part of to be stronger than ever before, and help your organization build your capacity to do this work, while I internally build mine.” - **Louie***



We understand and value our role at Youth MOVE as serving as a model to the behavioral health field. The programs we chose to offer, the way we invest our dollars, these serve as examples to other organizations. We felt it was very important to show that Fellowships are beneficial and can be effectively implemented for youth peers. The success of our first round of Fellowships invites a challenge to others in the field to fund and implement Fellowship models for young people with lived experience.

How do young people apply for a Fellowship?

Youth MOVE utilized existing communication pathways, including e-newsletters, to recruit individuals to apply for the Youth Peer Fellow positions. The application process is designed to work best for young people applying rather than organization preference or other application examples in the field. We offer the opportunity for video submission instead of a written application to model the value of supporting all forms of communication equally. In order to attract a robust and diverse group of candidates, Youth MOVE reduced the application burden by offering support to young people to facilitate the successful completion of an application. This included support with resume development, video submissions, and informational sessions. This increased support not only helped young people in this application process but also prepares them for future application processes! This approach strengthened the applicant pool for this opportunity and allowed us to meet young people who we may otherwise not have been connected with. It also offered each young person a benefit even if they were not selected for a Fellowship position. This mutually beneficial application design helped to decrease bias and increase access to encourage a diverse applicant pool. Youth MOVE consciously worked to deconstruct traditional application processes to enhance access and promote an equitable approach to recruitment.



In total, 37 individuals applied for the position. We reviewed each application and set up Zoom interviews with 21 applicants who best met our criteria for joining. Criteria included requirements to be:

- Between the ages of 16-22 | Identify within one or more of the following communities:
- BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) and/or LGBTQ2-S+
- Able to commit 15-20 hours a week to the compilation of fellowship materials
- Passion for youth peer support, advocacy, and systems change
- Passion for enhancing opportunities for BIPOC and LGBTQ2-S+ communities

From there, we narrowed interviewees down to eight top contenders and made our final three selections. We selected three qualified Peer Fellows who are BIPOC and/or identify as LGBTQ+, and launched a Zoom orientation in May 2021. Each of the Fellows then selected one of three policy action areas to focus their efforts: 1) youth peer workforce development, 2) state and agency-level readiness, and 3) future financing options; and developed work plans for their six-month placement.



How do Peer Fellows integrate with the work of YMN and staff? Why is this important?



The YMCI staff team emphasized the full integration of the Peer Fellows within the organization to provide each Fellow the best level of support and to truly value their insight and contributions. Peer Fellows were provided Youth MOVE email addresses and access to Slack (internal messaging platform) and Asana (project management software). Each Peer Fellow was paired with a YMCI staff member to provide coaching and subject matter expertise and met together regularly to establish the scope and timeline for their project.. Peer Fellows have direct access to leadership, communications staff, and program directors so that if they had any questions they could directly connect for answers and support.

They were encouraged to connect with other staff members to support their projects and key staff further nurtured and promoted these connections between the Peer Fellows and staff. This direct line of access is important to the success of the Peer Fellows and modeled the culture of a healthy and robust workplace for Peer Fellows to experience and look for in the future. It is important to Youth MOVE that Fellowships are interwoven into the being of the organization and this does not always occur.

What support was offered to the Fellows?

Youth MOVE has established practices and protocols for compensating young people and offered support to ensure seamless and accessible completion of financial paperwork, contracts, payment structure, and access to Operations Department staff for any issues or questions that might arise. The Fellowship compensation was direct support for that individual. Youth MOVE had no expectation or desire for Fellows to use their funds towards their project budget. For example, for Fellows convening focus groups to inform their projects, Youth MOVE covered costs out of our overall project budget.



Each Fellow had other significant life commitments while serving in their role with us, including school, work, and family obligations. We offered a great deal of flexibility to support their ability to balance competing demands, specifically by offering scheduling flexibility. Fellows were asked to create schedules and timelines that worked for them, and the Youth MOVE team scheduled around this information. Evening check-ins were readily offered. Communities implementing Fellowship programs across time zones need to be prepared to have staff available potentially both earlier in the morning and later in the evening to ensure Fellows have adequate access to support. Fellows identified what they wanted to be learning and then we matched them to subject matter experts and others who could help build capacity in these identified areas.



Peer Fellows met with supervisors on Zoom for supervision for 45 minutes, once per week. In this space, Fellows were able to voice their concerns, ask questions, and request any support necessary to move forward with their research and product development. If fellows were in need of any support outside of supervision, they had the ability to contact supervisors by email or through Slack at any time. Fellows were also given access to a generous office supply budget, as well as the ability to connect and meet with members of YMN's National Leadership Team for support and additional resources.

In addition, when Fellows began the process of holding focus group conversations, YMCI supervisors offered support with marketing and recruitment for those efforts. Youth MOVE leadership also supported Peer Fellows with the creation of online surveys to supplement feedback.

Youth MOVE invested in streamlining our decisions about what reporting was needed and did not require Fellows to do burdensome reporting including timesheets and long narrative monthly reports. Regular check-ins and progress in product development clearly showed level of effort.

What advice would you give another organization if they were to establish a similar Fellowship?

Youth MOVE wanted to explore key questions relevant to the youth peer support workforce. The Fellowship was designed to allow creativity and flexibility. Fellows selected their area of focus based on their own interests and identified areas of growth. Fellows had some level of understanding of the concept of youth peer support; however, there was not a requirement for the Fellows to be experts in youth peer support or to have led a formalized youth peer program to be eligible for participation. When considering applicants, Youth MOVE did not look for proficiency or familiarity in our areas of focus but rather a demonstrated capacity and an interest to learn and be coached. Additionally, Youth MOVE prioritized candidates with lived experience in youth serving systems. It was from this understanding and expertise that fellows brought success to the position. Our recommendation is to look outside of the box for candidates - lived experience alignment is often more important than resume experience. If there are specific skills or competencies required for a role, these can be achieved through ongoing professional development and coaching. While we had specific criteria in mind, we were flexible and committed to prioritizing lived experience as the most important qualification for participation in the Fellowship program.

What was the biggest challenge faced in implementing the Fellowships?

Fellowships were only one part of multiple strategies of YMCI efforts. When other aspects of the initiative were in high gear, staff's attention was split, which resulted in pulling away focus and energy from



supporting Peer Fellows. We recommend having a dedicated staff member readily available to connect consistently and as needed with Fellows.

We learned that some of the recruitment materials included inaccessible language including jargon some applicants viewed as too academic. This resulted in losing eligible candidates during the recruitment phase, as some did not apply over concerns of goodness of fit. In the future we would shift this language and recommend a thorough review of materials by young people prior to publicly sharing marketing materials.

What will we do in future Fellowship programs?

Peer Fellows indicated in close out evaluations and focus groups that they greatly desired a chance to participate in group projects with other Fellows. Youth MOVE plans to continue to engage Fellows in a key area of focus AND invite them into an overall group Fellowship project to move forward collectively.

While Peer Fellows were well integrated and connected to the Youth MOVE team, our organization is well connected in the field. We would like to bring this benefit tangibly to the Fellowship experience and facilitate networking opportunities for the Fellows and leaders in the field. The networking that did occur, primarily via conference presentations, was so well received by the Peer Fellows and leaders in other organizations.



Additionally, we plan to build in time for Fellowship project dissemination into the timeline to allow for more external presentations. All interactions Peer Fellows had with Youth MOVE partners, board members, and youth advisors was so positive and we would like to increase this. The Peer Fellows work was rich and there is great opportunity to increase conference presentations to further spread these learnings.

What was the value of the Peer Fellows' work to Youth MOVE National?

The final projects of the Peer Fellows so fully represent Youth MOVE National and are aligned with our mission and vision. We are incredibly proud of this work and are excited to share learnings further with the field. The Fellows selected project areas that are critical to the future work of Youth MOVE National AND the national youth peer landscape. Their research questions aligned with the needs in Youth MOVE National and in the field. Findings are contributing to moving us forward in answering these critical questions in the areas of financing, training pathways, and workforce development. Key projects created by the Peer Fellows are being integrated into the Youth MOVE portfolio and Fellows presented and shared their learnings with Youth MOVE staff so we could all move this work forward.



What do Peer Fellows say about the experience?

Fellows were also extremely proud of the work that they were able to accomplish over the year. Some notable quotes directly from the Peer Fellows:

“I honestly did more than I thought I was going to do. I’m proud of a lot. Honestly, I came in with the mindset that I would just do the best practices that I’ve seen other people do in change management and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) work and hope for the best. Ultimately, I was able to create tools for training and share language and workplace development.”



As another Fellow shared, *“We did a presentation in July or August and we led this presentation about our personal experiences with mental health advocacy spaces. I just really appreciated the fact that we could share about our work and about our lived experiences. For me, it was a moment that I was really proud of because of all the space I work – just to see other black folx who are passionate about the work that they are doing – that touched me so much.”*

Fellows also reported that the fellowships provided them with personal benefits as well.

“I’m very happy. I have a savings account now. Growing up in foster care now and I felt like I had messed up my opportunities when I didn’t do that the first time around. I have a career now that I made way more than when I first started.”

Another Fellow shared that the funds from the fellowship provided enough that they would not have to take any more school loans for the next two years.

What was the value of the Peer Fellows' work to Youth MOVE National?

The final projects of the Peer Fellows so fully represent Youth MOVE National and are aligned with our mission and vision. We are incredibly proud of this work and are excited to share learnings further with the field. The Fellows selected project areas that are critical to the future work of Youth MOVE National AND the national youth peer landscape. Their research questions aligned with the needs in Youth MOVE National and in the field. Findings are contributing to moving us forward in answering these critical questions in the areas of financing, training pathways, and workforce development. Key projects created by the Peer Fellows are



being integrated into the Youth MOVE portfolio and Fellows presented and shared their learnings with Youth MOVE staff so we could all move this work forward.

There have been numerous positive outcomes of the Peer Fellowship program including:

- Peer Fellows created tangible products and resources that will be shared with the behavioral health field to support expansion of youth peer services;
- Peer Fellows moved forward Youth MOVE's National Youth Peer Priority Agenda in big ways;
- Individual Peer Fellows are financially secure, have stronger resumes, and have created a vision about what their future career steps will be;
- Youth MOVE is excited about the experience and outcomes of the Fellowship and is committed to replicating this Fellowship model in future projects;
- Youth MOVE is ready and available to provide support and examples to other organizations interested in launching a Peer Fellowship model.

Find out more

- **[Youth MOVE Change Initiative](#)**
- **[Request support from Youth MOVE National in launching your own Peer Fellowship Model](#)**

Leadership from BIPOC and LGBTQ2S+ communities in youth-serving systems, like mental health, is imperative to creating comprehensive and equitable systems change. We must elevate these voices across all youth-serving efforts.

What conversations are you having?