

# Recruiting and Retaining Youth Peer Support Specialists

## Implementation Guide



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# Introduction

Depending on your state, agency, or grant program, youth peer support specialists (also known as youth peer workers, transitional age youth peers, or youth engagement specialists) are the fundamental liaison positions in any successful and sustainable youth peer support program or organization.

Is your organization ready to implement strategies on recruiting and retaining youth peer support specialists to ensure they are valued and appreciated in their roles? Does your organization have the capacity to take on a diverse and unique group of individuals with multi-faceted experiences and needs?

In this implementation guide, we will cover considerations and strategies for recruiting and retaining youth peer support specialists, inclusive of practices around hiring, orientation, and supervision to ensure that agencies are equipped with best practices to continuously support youth peer support specialists in their role.

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## Funded by Youth MOVE Peer Center



Youth MOVE National’s Consumer Peer Center was established in July 2020, with grant funding support from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Across the country, recovery-oriented services and consumer run organizations, including youth and family- run organizations, are increasingly seen as vital supports within the mental health service array. As a youth-run peer organization, YMN honors lived experience and recognizes the value of both traditional and non-traditional supports. We serve peers across the lifespan, their families, and providers of all ages, to grow the youth peer movement across the United States. As one of five funded Centers, we look forward to collaborating with our partners to improve and sustain the implementation of peer and recovery-oriented services and supports.



# Defining and Orienting the Youth Peer Support Specialist Role

## How do we define a youth peer support specialist?

A youth peer support specialist (YPSS) is an individual who works with young people who are usually system impacted (e.g., child welfare/foster care, mental/behavioral health, juvenile justice) or experiencing unique life challenges. In order to be a “peer” YPSSs need to be close in age with the young people they work with and utilize their own lived and living experiences with youth-serving systems in order to relate to and engage with the youth they serve. In their work together, YPSSs help youth to identify personal goals and advocate for themselves in other settings such as workplaces, clinics, and schools.



As an initial consideration, organization leaders and supervisors should ensure that YPSS job descriptions are reflective of best practices around youth peer support. Supervisors are encouraged to be proactive by equipping the YPSS with pertinent information about their responsibilities, tasks, and competencies through the onboarding process and employment.

**Check out an example of a youth peer support specialist job description >>**



## New Employee Orientation

New employee orientations are necessary for YPSS as they provide a seamless and intentional integration of their role within the agency. Orientation packets for YPSS can include valuable information, resources, and transparency around agency practices, including but not limited to:

- Job descriptions
- Youth peer support model/frameworks
- Organizational values and mission statement
- Inclusive and affirming workplace practices
- Organizations’ policies, procedures and protocols
- Organizational history and chart
- Program funding information
- Program requirements
- Communication and scheduling expectations
- Program tipsheets
- Program fact sheets and marketing materials
- Benefits information

## Workplace Accommodations

Organizations and agencies that are hiring positions of YPSS should also ensure that they provide necessary workplace accommodations such as (but not limited to):



- Adequate paid time off
- Flexible work hours
- Hybrid or remote schedules
- Identity and culturally affirming care
- Ergonomic supplies
- Accessible and assistive technologies
- Liveable/equitable wages and a benefits package
- Support in self-care and dealing with potential secondary trauma

YPSSs are working in a profession where lived experience is at the forefront of what they do and are supporting youth who are often navigating mental health challenges, substance misuse recovery efforts, and difficult circumstances. Consider organizational benefits and practices that will meet the needs of the YPSS and the agency.

For additional resources, examples, and/or technical assistance around workplace accommodations, visit the [\*\*Job Accommodation Network\*\*](#)<sup>2</sup> or [\*\*Work Without Limits\*\*](#).<sup>3</sup>

## Scenario- Juanita's Supervisor

*Juanita has been working at your agency for two months. One morning, you notice that Juanita looks unwell. You ask them what's going on and if they are alright. They inform you that driving has been a problem since they started working at the agency. "I keep having nightmares of a previous accident I had while I was transporting program participants in my car. I can't sleep because of this and it's been negatively affecting the way I drive, when I know I can do better." You let them know that their concerns are heard and you'll look into an alternative.*

How will you work to address Juanita's concern? Is there a way that Juanita can still do their job and not drive the youth served? What types of accommodations can be made? What other ways can Juanita still engage the youth served?

## Recruitment of Youth Peer Support Specialists

Identifying and recruiting young adults to apply for YPSS positions is a challenging first step for many agencies. The following considerations and strategies are to ease the process and increase the likelihood of a good pairing between the role and the applicant(s). They can include, but are not limited to:



- The agency's culture and operations
- Demonstrated readiness to implement youth peer support services
- Clearly defined job responsibilities of the YPSS
- Adequate training
- Continuing education opportunities
- Demonstrated opportunities for professional development and potential promotions
- Direct examples of the ways in which the workplace is accepting and welcoming to all people
- Intentional plans for supervision of YPSS's



Agency champions for YPSS can use the **Youth Peer Support Readiness Questionnaire**<sup>4</sup> in order to assess their workplaces and colleagues. The questionnaire not only addresses the needs of agencies and their hiring staff, but also those of young people applying for the position.

Beyond reflection and conversations with colleagues, we encourage agencies and, especially the staff responsible for recruiting, training, supervising, and coaching the incoming youth peer support workforce, to creatively collaborate with one another and with youth from the community.

## Thinking Activity

### What does our ideal YPSS workforce look like?

You might use a simple tool to collect ideas, such as a word document or virtual whiteboard, or you could try a more interactive activity.

### Keep in Mind...

*Are there particular needs your served population have? (Disability, language, system involvement, gender identity, cultural/regional, etc.)*

*How many youth peer support specialists do you have in your workforce? How many supervisors? What regions or agencies are each of these YPSS housed in?*



*What are the demographics of the community you are in? Does your staff reflect those demographics?*

*What skills do they have that would enhance the work? Interests (sports, arts, music, etc.), connections, (to theater community, faith communities, cultural or regional communities), and personality traits (introverted, extroverted, quieter, outgoing, etc.) are important to consider so you hire a variety of peers to serve a variety of youth.*

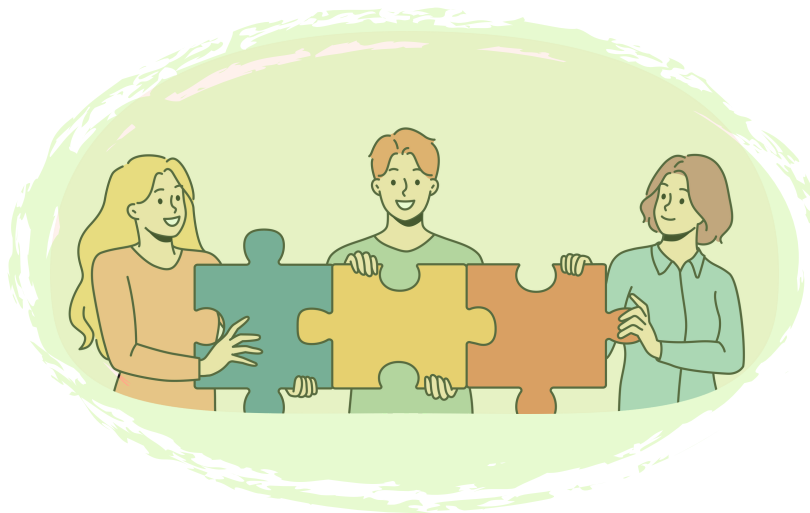
Agencies are often eager to begin the hiring process due to situations like funding requirements, deliverable timelines, or pressure from executives/decision-makers within the organization. Not uncommonly, a number of factors such as dedicated staff time for recruitment efforts, hiring processes that are not youth friendly, unclear job descriptions, etc., combined with the role being new and unfamiliar, can result in a low number of applicants.

## Current Connections

When considering where to recruit or identify young adults with lived experience who may be interested in these new roles, reflect on your current connections with young people:

- Do you know young adults who have recently participated in your programs and/or events?
- Are you connected to youth run organizations or other youth programs in your communities?
- Are the young people you are already connected to representative of the communities served/demographics you wish to recruit from? (e.g. race/ethnicity, lived experience, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, neighborhood or region, education experiences, language, socioeconomic status, etc.)

Your reflections should include the young people you are currently connected to and frequently engage with, as well as the existing partners in the community who are connected to young people.





## Recruitment Process

Once there is a clear vision for your workforce and initial recruitment process, it is time to review hiring materials!

### Review your message



#### 1. Develop a compelling job description

- Language: ensure words and language used across the agency (and ideally, in the community) align to reduce confusion and avoid acronyms. The following all describe a similar role, but is not always clear to a candidate: Certified Peer Support Specialist- Youth (CPS-Y), Youth Peer Specialist, Youth Parent Peer Support Specialist, Youth Peer Worker.
- Time, Compensation, Description: Young adults know they can earn x amount of dollars at a major food chain. So, it is important that time required, compensation (including perks or benefits), and a thorough and accurate job description are available up front.

#### 2. Is your job description clear, concise, and interesting? Is there transparency around how young people could offer their expertise?

#### 3. Are your recruitment materials (flyers, e-newsletters, job postings) clear, concise, and interesting? Are they accessible to a wide range of candidates (social media, job fairs, message boards, emails, etc.)?

### Know your audience



#### 1. Adjust your messaging accordingly for the following audiences:

- Clinicians who may refer youth/young adults
- Recreation programs that have young adult leadership pipelines already established such as YMCAs, Jewish Community Centers (JCCs), local camps or after school programs, etc.
- Faith communities with youth/young adult groups
- Cross system/agency partners such as child welfare or juvenile justice system
- Residential homes and programs
- Acute level hospital (including forensics)
- Community-based behavioral health agencies
- Transitional age and houseless youth drop-in centers
- Schools (alternative, mainstream, higher ed., Vocational Rehab (VR), English language learners (ELL) programs, college or university career services, etc.
- Libraries (post near Wi-Fi instructions, in the mental health section, in job searching section, etc. Maybe include rip off tabs or “take a picture” note on the flyer)

#### 2. Consider partners in the community, other therapeutic programs, clinicians, as well as parents or caregivers

#### 3. Expand beyond your usual audience- consider community partners you haven't engaged with before



## Create agency consensus

Human Resources (HR) and the hiring staff are not the only invested parties in the outcome of a hiring process. Administrators who might field phone or email inquiries should know what to listen for and be able to provide guidance as necessary, increasing the likelihood of a positive first interaction with your agency.



Everyone in the agency should also know the role and its responsibilities so they are positioned to identify collaborations amongst departments once a candidate is hired, as well as potentially provide insight and feedback in cases of onsite interviews, job shadowing, or any other in-person interactions during the hiring process.

### 1. Check assumptions

- Not every youth who participated in a program wants to be a YPSS, or share their story with others
- Not all youth who struggled with, or didn't complete your programming, should be crossed off your recruitment list
- Not every young adult who would make a strong applicant uses system-affiliated jargon to describe their lived experience, or fully understands the system
- Don't assume every partner or adult you share your recruitment effort with will have bought into the benefits of youth peer support at your agency
- Not every young person uses social media or email, or even owns a computer, cell phone, etc.

### 2. Track and optimize your results

- Include questions like these in your application or interview process: "Where did you hear about this job?" AND "Why did you choose to apply to this role and/or agency?"
- If one recruitment method brought in some strong candidates, put more effort towards that area. If there have been little to no responses to a Facebook ad, try paying for an Instagram ad or a radio spot instead
- Ensure there is someone on the staff whose responsibility is dedicated to looking at this information and implementing strategies based upon feedback

### 3. Improve over time

- Try out new places or methods of advertising (e.g. a new café, smaller locally-owned restaurants, libraries, employment fairs, job coach companies, Vocational Rehab)
- As you recruit and retain youth peer support specialists to your staff, ensure their continuous input and feedback (beyond just the interview process and orientation), along with the youth they're working with

## Models of Supervision

Similar to the youth peer support specialist's role, supervisors of peers should adopt an intentional and affirming supervision approach. The youth-driven, individualized, and nuanced nature of the youth peer support model often coincides with various emerging circumstances and situations, so youth peer support specialists are continually adapting to settings or challenges and will need access to an ongoing and adequate supervision and support structure.



Supervisors of YPSSs require a unique skill set that is pivotal to a productive relationship with supervisees. They inherently have a dual role of embedding youth peer support values within supervisory engagement, coupled with functional or administrative supervision duties. When it comes to supervising TPSS's, supervisors should exhibit strength-based and trauma-informed approaches by prioritizing the employee's success. Supervisors of YPSSs should be skilled in implementing and uplifting the following trauma-informed principles from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

**Safety  
(Physical/Emotional)**



**Collaboration  
and Mutuality**



**Trustworthiness  
and Transparency**



**Empowerment,  
Voice, and Choice**



**Cultural, Historical, and  
Gender Issues**



**Peer Support  
and Connection**



To guide the YPSS, supervisors will have to demonstrate familiarity with the youth peer support model and fundamentally believe in the value of maintaining fidelity to the model. Additionally, supervisors of YPSSs will need to ensure that supervisees have access to the support, resources, and tools necessary to do their job effectively and be set up to succeed.

## **Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach<sup>5</sup>**

The CDC's Center for Preparedness and Response (CPR), in collaboration with SAMHSA's National Center for Trauma-Informed Care (NCTIC), developed and led a training for CPR employees about the role of trauma-informed care during public health emergencies. The training aimed to increase responder awareness of the impact that trauma can have in the communities where they work.

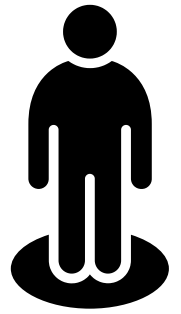
Adopting a trauma-informed approach is not accomplished through any single particular technique or checklist. It requires constant attention, caring awareness, sensitivity, and possibly a cultural change at an organizational level. On-going internal organizational assessment and quality improvement, as well as engagement with community stakeholders, will help to imbed this approach which can be augmented with organizational development and practice improvement. The training provided by CPR and NCTIC was the first step for CDC to view emergency preparedness and response through a trauma-informed lens.



# Developing a Supervision Structure for Youth Peer Support Specialists

## Individual Supervision

Also known as “check-ins” or “one-on-ones”. It is an opportunity for supervisors to create a trauma-informed environment for YPSSs to have open dialogue and bring up any celebrations or challenges occurring in their work. Check-ins can also focus on the youth served and strengthen the youth peer support practices utilized with the young person. Supervisors may ask YPSSs to prepare questions or reflections for supervision in advance and ask them to discuss incorporating the tenants of youth peer support in each peer relationship. The supervisor’s role is to be youth-driven and promote fidelity to the youth peer support model while also sharing constructive feedback for individual situations that arise with youth served. Supervisors should continually check in with YPSSs about the negotiation of boundaries within peer support and reinforce the program's limitations and the organization's values. Additionally, check-ins are an opportunity for collaboration with the supervisee. It is best practice for supervisors to work together with the YPSS to outline and identify the next steps in conversations and support employees’ goals.



## Co-Supervision

Also known as “co-reflections”, an additional supervision structure that allows for YPSSs to go through a peer learning process and discuss any celebrations and challenges in their role in a collaborative way. Supervisors can facilitate these dialogues or ask the group if they would like to alternate facilitators and have YPSSs practice group facilitation as a skill. Co-supervision conversations could include sharing similar or different lived experiences, perspectives, role-playing, de-coding scenarios, and presenting feedback based on youth peer support practices. It is encouraged to establish learning agreements or group norms in this space and maintain confidentiality. Co-supervision spaces are intended to be value-added for YPSSs to feel comfortable where meaningful sharing and problem-solving can happen for peer learning.



## Team Meetings

A great platform to address administrative supervision responsibilities with YPSSs and create opportunities for transparency around an agency’s successes and opportunities for growth. Supervisors typically provide program and agency updates and review best practices related to communication or documentation as well as other required policies, procedures, and protocols. Team meetings can also be an opportunity to discuss organizational values and share tools and resources that will guide YPSSs in meeting program expectations and overall agency requirements. Supervisors can also integrate proper program planning, and professional development opportunities for YPSSs in a team setting.





## Performance Evaluation

A necessary integration into the supervision structure of YPSSs. Depending on an organization's policy, performance evaluations can occur anytime, at any rate of recurrence, but at minimum, should be at least on an annual basis. Supervisors should ask YPSSs to complete a self-evaluation to reflect on how their work is going as part of the process. Supervisors typically use fidelity tools in youth peer support programs to review how the YPSS uses the model throughout their career and identify the areas where the YPSS might need growth or practice. Performance evaluations are also opportunities for supervisors and YPSSs to address any concerns and opportunities for further collaboration, however, nothing should come as a surprise, as open communication should be happening outside of evaluations spaces as well. Supervisors often establish role clarity and revisit any personal or professional goals and needs while still celebrating the YPSSs progress in their work.



## External Supervision

A beneficial method to expand the support network of YPSSs. Supervisors may offer exterior supervision options through statewide or national peer support groups. External supervision likely serves as another safe space for YPSSs for workforce and skills development.



## Supervisors with Lived Experience

When a supervisor has been a youth peer support specialist previously, it can provide valuable insight and context to understand how to support staff and the youth and will improve the understanding around the relational circumstances that YPSSs may navigate in their day-to-day work. In the interest of maintaining fidelity to the youth peer support model, practicing shared values in the supervisor/supervisee relationship builds capacity for optimal engagement and trustworthiness, essential to the successful implementation of peer services.



- Examples of supervision topics based on needs of youth being served:
  - Adverse experiences
  - Youth involvement in systems (mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare, etc.)
  - Obtaining employment or housing
  - Substance misuse and harm reduction models
  - Access to resources
  - Affirming youth from marginalized identities
  - Connection to the community
  - Cultural awareness
  - Transitions
  - At-risk factors
  - Mandated reporting
  - Safety planning
  - And more



## Access to Clinical Supervision IF Required by Medicaid

Clinical supervision may be a necessary component of the peer support program, depending on the youth peer support service's structure or funding requirements. In these instances, organizations are also encouraged to have additional recommended supervision structures in place, as mentioned above. Clinical supervision would otherwise still focus on the youth peer support specialist's work instead of becoming a clinical intervention. It is equally vital for clinical supervisors to display competence in the youth peer support model through their language and behaviors with YPSSs and across the organization. **Reflective supervision**<sup>6</sup> is also an effective model to use with YPSSs.

## Tips for Supervision of Youth Peer Support Specialists

### Supervision of Peer Programs General Responsibilities

- Supervision and coaching
- Program development/sustainability
- Collaboration and partnerships
- Evaluation and reporting
- Fidelity monitoring and documentation
- Compliance with policies/procedures
- Group facilitation and presentation
- Leadership and advocacy
- Orientation and training
- Maintaining a welcoming and inclusive environment
- Budgeting and financial contracts
- Knowledge of core principles and practices

### Addressing Job Difficulties and General Coaching

Supervisors of YPSSs play a crucial role in the ongoing coaching process outside of training and continuing education. Part of the coaching process typically involves promoting youth peer support and advocating within organizations and systems for program sustainability. Supervisors may be responsible for educating agency-level leadership and other partnerships about youth peer support, reinforcing the YPSS's scope of work and significance. Furthermore, supervisors are encouraged to ensure that YPSSs feel respected and valued in the workplace. Supervisors may implement internal feedback loops and other evaluations such as continuous quality improvement as a mechanism to change an organization's culture.

### Scenario- Finn's Supervision

How would you address these concerns and offer support?

*Finn is a reliable youth peer support specialist, who is able to connect with youth who have experienced really negative experiences in foster care. Lately, she's been late to appointments with youth more often than not, and her appearance appears to be messy and unkempt. You have a scheduled supervision meeting with Finn this week.*



## Supervision Topics



## Conclusion

While the concepts and considerations throughout this implementation guide can provide a brief snapshot of potential hiring and sustainability planning of YPSSs within an organization, it is important to note that more robust considerations could be factors depending on location, technology accessibility, organizational readiness, funding, etc. The goal, ultimately, should be that in addition to considering some of these practices outlined above, an agency should really prioritize communication and transparency with candidates in terms of their aspirations, needs, professional development, accommodations, learning styles, etc. Communication really is key, as gathering insight and expertise from the young people who will be directly affected by the agency's policies around YPSS recruitment and retention, can only enhance staff culture by relying practices and policies that work with them in a more authentic way. Moreover, the concepts throughout this guide pertaining to youth peer support specialists do not need to exist in a vacuum and can instead provide best practices for sustainability for all staff within the agency as a whole.

## Tools & Resources

**Young Adult Peer Mentoring Self Assessment Toolkit**

**Young Adult Peer Mentoring Practice Profile: Core Elements**

For questions, comments, or concerns, please contact:

**Youth MOVE National**  
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# References

- <sup>1</sup> [https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/HTItoolkit/files/05-Organization\\_of\\_Peer\\_Support/5-Job\\_Descriptions/A.Youth\\_Peer\\_Support\\_Specialist.pdf](https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/HTItoolkit/files/05-Organization_of_Peer_Support/5-Job_Descriptions/A.Youth_Peer_Support_Specialist.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> <https://askjan.org/>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://workwithoutlimits.org/resources/>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Youth-Peer-Support-Readiness-Questionnaire.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.multiplyingconnections.org/become-trauma-informed/what-reflective-supervision>
- <sup>6</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/orr/infographics/6\\_principles\\_trauma\\_info.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/orr/infographics/6_principles_trauma_info.htm)