



The Importance of Youth-Run Programming for Behavioral Health

The authors of this commentary are part of the leadership team of Youth MOVE National (YMN), a youth-run, chapter-membership organization focused on improving services and systems for youth and young adults by uniting the voices of individuals who have lived experience within those systems.

Reflecting a growing evidence base, programs and initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for youth and young adults with serious mental health conditions increasingly recognize the importance of taking a Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach. Organizations run by and for young people with lived experience in behavioral health and related systems play a unique and important role in promoting and supporting systems change that is in line with this PYD vision. Research is needed to support evolution of systems and services so that they are more in line with PYD, and to better understand and document the important role of youth-run organizations in this transformation.

PYD is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth and young adults within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; that recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and that promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. In recent decades,

youth-serving organizations, including Boys & Girls Clubs, 4-H, the YMCA, and the YWCA increasingly have adopted a PYD focus. Although these organizations continue to serve as cornerstones in communities across the country, they generally lack the funding, capacity, and/or expertise to engage and serve youth and young adults with significant behavioral challenges and to address their unique developmental needs.

YOUTH-RUN ORGANIZATIONS

This gap in PYD programming for youth and young adults is starting to be filled by organizations run by and for youth and young adults who have experienced behavioral health challenges, and are personally knowledgeable about strengths and limitations of existing services and systems. Youth-run organizations are uniquely positioned to support the transformation of youth-serving organizations and systems so that they are more consistent with PYD principles.

Youth MOVE National (YMN; <https://www.youthmove-national.org>) is an established youth-run organization devoted to improving services and systems for youth and young adults by uniting the voices of individuals who have lived experience within those systems. With a chapter network spanning 38 states, 4 tribes, and the District of Columbia, Youth MOVE's membership includes youth and young adults ages 14-29 with lived experiences inclusive of mental health, criminal justice, LGBTQI2-S, child welfare, substance misuse, homelessness, residential treatment, developmental and physical disabilities, and supported employment, as well as

parenting teens, immigrants and refugees, young people with HIV/AIDS, tribal youth, and members of the military.

PROGRAMMING FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

YMN chapters offer PYD programming responsive to the developmental needs of their diverse members, including youth leadership and advocacy training, positive and pro-social activities, skill development groups, research and evaluation, and navigation and referral services.¹ Youth-run organizations are uniquely able to provide a safe, supportive, and positive environment for youth and young adults with lived systems experience to come together. This also promotes the kinds of supportive peer relationships youth are continually seeking, and that are a key element of PYD.

youth participation in system-improvement efforts has expanded greatly in youth homelessness work, the substance abuse field, and within juvenile justice and child welfare during this time as well.

Youth-run programs, their service provider agencies, and system partners each benefit from collaborating on efforts to meaningfully engage youth and young adults in systems-change work. The youth-run organization can provide training to system partners and agency staff on youth engagement, identify youth with lived experience to join advisory or governance boards, and facilitate development of an invaluable peer network for these youth leaders. Furthermore, young people who have access to the leadership and advocacy training and support from youth-run organizations are prepared to be meaningful participants not only in their own care, but also in leadership and advisory roles within service agencies. Engaging youth and young adults in these roles can benefit systems and agencies by helping them to design and implement new policies and practices that lead to more engaging and effective services.^{3,4}

There is also evidence that youth and young adults benefit when they become engaged in activism, advocacy, and other community and civic roles. Young people point to these roles and activities as a source of increased confidence and self-esteem, as well as an opportunity to learn new skills, including organizational skills, communication and group skills, and a variety of employment-related skills.⁴

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Unlike formal, traditional mental health and related services that almost always have barriers limiting access (e.g., referral, diagnostic criteria, health insurance), programming offered by YMN chapters and similar organizations is community-based and easily accessible, at the frequency and intensity that youth find helpful and comfortable.

SUPPORT FOR SYSTEMS-CHANGE WORK

YMN chapters and other similar organizations also play a key role in motivating and supporting the transformation of service systems, making them more in line with PYD principles. Over the past 20 years, behavioral health and associated systems have worked to empower youth and young adults with lived experience to exercise their “voice” to improve systems and services. Great strides occurred within the federally-funded Children’s Mental Health Initiative, more commonly referred to as Systems of Care.² Systems of Care grantees have established standard principles ensuring that youth voice is a critical element of required programming, from service delivery to governance. Commitment to

HELPING TO BUILD THE PEER SUPPORT WORKFORCE

As youth and young adults have grown more influential in systems-change efforts, they have consistently advocated for increased access to peer support. While research is limited in the area of youth peer support, results from emerging youth peer programs and promising findings from research in adult peer support and youth mentoring programs warrant a growing interest in the field in continued investment in youth peer support programs.

There are important roles for youth-run organizations to play in the growth of youth peer support, most notably in the development of the workforce. In fact, these organizations are perfectly situated to identify and recruit future youth peer providers. Frequently, the peer provider role may feel isolating. Youth-run organizations can leverage their networks to build peer space for youth peer providers to develop relationships and access capacity-building training to support their long-term success in the role.

While the youth movement is continuing to make great strides in building effective support networks for vulnerable youth populations and in improving services, there is much work to be done. The work of youth-run organizations, including Youth MOVE chapters, needs to be driven by the powerful voices of youth with lived experience; and yet, there are essential roles for all partners in the system to play.

LOOKING FORWARD

Investment and commitment from policy makers and service providers is required to shift how services are accessed and delivered, including the adoption of youth-guided planning, advancement of youth peer support programs that are readily accessible, and investment in the infrastructure and operation of youth-run organizations.

Regular and rigorous evaluation and continued research into the effectiveness of youth-run programs are critical factors for their long-term sustainability. The Federal Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs has developed a federal-level research agenda that aims to fill gaps in the literature related to PYD theory and conceptualization, data sources and indicators, program implementation, and effectiveness.⁵ Additionally, research is needed that will demonstrate the value of youth-run organizations and the services they provide. Priority questions for further research relating to youth-run organizations are:

- What program indicators lead to increased and sustainable youth engagement?
- To what extent do youth-run programs offer practices that lead to improved outcomes for youth involved?
- To what extent do youth-run organizations shape policy and practices within helping systems?
- What are the core competencies of an effective youth peer workforce?

The work of most youth-run organizations is still in early development. For long-term sustainability, youth-run organizations will need to strengthen their organizational infrastructure, build the capacity of their teams, and identify a diverse set of sustainable funding sources. Key commitments need to be made by systems leaders at the federal, state, and tribal level, to leverage flexible funding streams to support youth-run organizations. Strong and lasting commitments, cemented in policy, need to be made to ensure the ongoing presence and influence of youth voice and youth-run organizations within systems and services.

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There are important roles for youth-run organizations to play in the growth of youth peer support.

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