



Implementing the Peer Support Specialist Role: Providing Direct, Individualized Support in a Local Program



This information brief provides an example of how one locally-initiated program has implemented the Peer Support Specialist role for youth and young adults with serious mental health conditions. The brief covers aspects of training, coaching, supervision, role definition and financing; and describes challenges and solutions.

Overview of the Program

The Youth Empowerment Support (YES!) Program provides opportunities and trainings for community and system transformation as well as direct support, groups, and leadership opportunities for young people at risk of, in, or emancipating out of system services. YES! began in 2007 in Auburn, CA. The program was originally funded by a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, but with the support of Placer County, YES! was able to find more sustainable funding through the Mental Health Services

Act and Wraparound funding (state legislation known as SB-163 and often referred to as the “millionaire’s tax”). The YES! program is part of an organization named Whole Person Learning, which provides support and guidance in areas such as navigating policies, budgeting, grants, and human resources.

YES! hires staff that are 18 years or older and:

“...no longer receive any system services from Children’s System of Care, so that would be like child welfare or probation. We also state

that they need to have a strong work ethic; be dependable, flexible, and able to adapt to daily changes and challenges. That's mainly because of the atmosphere we work in and every day they come in and it's something different. They also need to have knowledge of and ability to learn positive youth development, strengths-based practice and cultural competence; the ability to work cooperatively and decisively with individuals and groups with different educational, economic, cultural and racial backgrounds; and...also must pass a criminal background check and drug screening."

Currently, there are two full-time (including the Program Manager) and one part-time staff, all with lived experience. Staff are trained in Motivational Interviewing, suicide prevention, and cultural competency, and they also receive training from California's Youth Development Institute. Other training is provided as needed, and county and community partners provide affordable trainings as well as online resources. YES! staff have prior experience with and knowledge of the various systems YES! works with. These include experiences with the child welfare, juvenile justice, and/or mental health systems. The Program Manager, along with the Director of Whole Person Learning, co-

supervise the Youth Coordinators. The use of two supervisors ensures a collaborative, team approach that provides support for different aspects of the job.

The youth referred to this program come from various sources. In the beginning, the youth were referred through county services. As the program has gained a positive reputation, though, many youth are self-referring or referring their peers. The youth served are 12-26 years old. YES! is dedicated to providing individualized services that do not replicate support that is already available within the community.

"We try to find other resources to meet [the youth's] need and link that young person up with [a resource], but if there isn't a service or support in the community or county that would meet that need then we try to fill in that gap. We'd also bring that information back to the county and community through various meetings that our coordinators are in, leadership meetings or system change projects, and so we're constantly trying to loop our feedback from doing direct support in the community and our own lived experience back to the county and the community to make improvement."

Role of Youth Coordinators

YES! Youth Coordinators provide individualized support for youth in three phases. The first phase, called the "intro phase," involves the Youth Coordinator getting to know a youth, developing trust, becoming familiar with the youth's culture, and focusing on what the youth hopes to achieve during their time together. During this phase, the Youth Coordinator is able to learn what resources will best suit the youth and what level of support will help the youth succeed.

The next phase, "intensive" or "periodic support," really focuses on supporting youth and connecting them with various community resources as well as assisting them in learning how to navigate systems independently.

"So for example if a youth comes into our program and they're homeless, and let's say they were adopted and they don't qualify for certain programs or let's say they never entered the system but they bounce around,

they don't have any family support and now they're homeless. We would have to do a lot more work with that individual than, say, with somebody who comes in and maybe qualifies for a lot of services because they grew up in the system and emancipated out. So we would link one person up with services that would be periodic, and the other homeless youth – we would be trying to meet their basic needs, working multiple days trying to meet their needs."

The final phase, the "transition phase," involves evaluating the services that have been provided and checking in with the youth to find out if they have achieved what they wanted during their time at YES!. Also, the final phase is a time for making sure the youth have the resources they need to continue to move forward with

their goals, and for celebration for what has been accomplished.

Youth Coordinators also sit in on meetings such as Individual Education Planning, Placement Planning, and Family Team Meetings. In these settings, the Youth Coordinator provides information to the family members and the youth so that they are prepared and know what to expect. The Youth Coordinators encourage youth to advocate for themselves, but in instances when perhaps the youth is not being heard or is not ready to speak up, they will support the youth in whatever manner is most comfortable for the youth. It is the hope of the Youth Coordinators that this modeling will further encourage the youth to advocate for themselves. The Youth Coordinator is continuously working with the youth to improve existing skills and build new ones.

Challenges

As with most programs with Youth Coordinator roles, there have been challenges to creating and sustaining the role. In the beginning, there was quite a bit of stigma from adult professionals. Because YES! hires youth who have experience with systems such as child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice, some staff were not very supportive of hiring them for professional roles.

"There's a lot of stigma around our work and breaking down those barriers in both our county and community has been a challenge at times and I always say the only reasons we have sustainable staff is because people come to this job with the passion that they want to make a change. The bad experiences you've had are going to come up in this job for sure because you're working with the county and seeing its flaws, but you also get to see the strengths... I think when people go through

this system and they first take a job trying to work on system transformation, they come in with their own bias and stigma towards the system so it goes both ways."

Additionally, there is a need to support the Youth Coordinators during their own time of transition into a professional role. The Youth Coordinators are valuable because of their experiences, but these experiences may also mean the Youth Coordinators require extra support from supervisors.

The YES! Program Manager and the Director of Whole Person Learning emphasize the importance of providing a safe workplace that encourages debriefing. They also encourage Youth Coordinators to participate in trainings and community relationship building in order to build their skills and relationships and continue their growth as advocates and professionals.

“Our staff – we come with our lived experience and we may, to some degree, have work history we bring with us, but we’re not necessarily coming with a degree so I think it’s really important to have an employer who will find

those resources for you. I think that’s important – to have an employer who is willing to find those things for your program and support you in that.”

Future Work

Many of the youth who have received support from YES! have voiced a desire to have a drop-in center where they can socialize and access a variety of resources in one place. YES! will be looking into possibilities to make this a reality. Currently, YES! will be launching a cloud plat-

form where youth can store their vital documents and have them all in one safe location called HealthShack. This is especially important for youth who move often or do not have stable housing.

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