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
YES! Youth Coordinators provide individualized support for youth in three phases. The role of Youth Coordinators involves 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.

“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.”
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 platform 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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