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# YOUTH SUPPORT PARTNERS (YSP)



Youth Support Partners (YSP) are an important aspect of the High Fidelity Wraparound (HFW) process adopted by DHS to further improve outcomes for those we serve.

The High Fidelity Wraparound (HFW) process is a collaborative, team-based approach to engagement and planning for services and supports for children and youth with complex needs involved in our child-serving systems and their families.

While the HFW team includes the identified child/youth, parents/caregivers, family and community members, DHS professionals, educators and family support partners, the inclusion of Youth Support Partners can improve the chances of a successful outcome. The Youth Support Partners ensure that the youth involved in the process have their voices heard and their choices honored. They can do this because they have, themselves, utilized services from one or more of the DHS child-serving systems and bring their personal experiences to the HFW process.

The story we highlight here is an example of what can happen when a youth struggling to succeed in the HFW process is paired with a Youth Support Partner. The Youth Support Partner, and the unique perspective he brought to their relationship, played a key role in ensuring a successful outcome for this youth.

Marc Cherna  
Director

Allegheny County Department of Human Services



Each morning, Mike walks across the Smithfield Street Bridge and treks through downtown to the Regional Enterprise Tower where he works for DHS as a Youth

Support Partner (YSP). During his walk, he thinks about the day ahead and the youth success stories he played a part in. His work, like many human services positions, requires a caring heart, dedication and understanding.

Understanding is perhaps the most important characteristic of a YSP. At one point in his life, Mike, too, was in the same situation as many of the youth he encounters through his work. All YSPs are young adults who earlier in their lives have utilized services from one or more of the DHS child-serving systems and who draw from these personal experiences to enhance the High Fidelity Wraparound (HFW) process.

“When I was younger, I received services for ADHD,” said Mike. “I would really struggle in daily life and was kind of out of control as a teen. Since I have a background with receiving ADHD-related services, I’m matched up with kids who can relate to me and have similar issues.”

This shared experience has assisted in the successful transition of many youth and their families to self-sustainability.

For more than a year, Mike has worked as a member of the HFW team to provide an empathetic link to the youth and support young persons by ensuring they feel comfortable offering their opinion and ensuring that their voices are heard and their choices are incorporated in the service planning process.

“Sometimes youth have trouble being heard and listened to in meetings and planning sessions because they are kids,” said Mike. “As a Youth Support Partner, I help make sure their voice is heard and understood. I develop a connection with each youth I work with so they trust me to serve their best interests and be open with me. I also give the youth someone to confide in. I can relate to their problems.”



Rich Fitzgerald  
Allegheny County Executive

Early in his career as a YSP, Mike worked with a youth named Andy. When Mike first met Andy, the youth's family was already two years into the HFW process and little progress was being made. Mike was asked to connect with the 14 year old and help the team make progress with the family.

"Andy and I connected right off the bat," said Mike. "He opened up to me right away and we made more progress in two days than had been made in the entire two years his family was in the HFW process. This is why YSPs can be so valuable to a family's success."

When Andy first met Mike, he wasn't sure what to expect. After the first several meetings, however, Andy knew that Mike was someone who could really help him.

"There were times I just needed someone to vent to," said Andy. "You can only talk to friends so much before you feel like you're burdening them, and a lot of times you feel like you can't talk to friends about psychiatric treatment without feeling weird. Mike has had similar experiences in his life, so he's easier to talk to, and he understands."

Beyond dealing with bipolar disorder and his mother's ongoing cancer treatments, Andy also struggled with a drug addiction.

"It started when I was in eighth grade and I did cocaine," said Andy. "For awhile I was doing a lot of uppers and really used to do a little bit of everything."

When Andy opened up to Mike about his drug addiction, Mike knew he had to handle the situation carefully. He knew that it was likely that Andy's drug use affected his bipolar medications and that the mix could be dangerous, even deadly. He had to balance Andy's safety with keeping the trusting relationship they had developed.

"When he told me about his problem, Andy didn't want to tell others in the HFW team, and I didn't want him to feel betrayed that he had talked with me," said Mike. "Together, we worked out a plan for Andy to bring the issue to the HFW team at the next group session."

When it came time to open up to the team, Mike played his valued role of youth advocate and supported Andy. Recognizing that this was not a typical approach to addiction, Andy and his family made the decision not to use formal rehabilitation services, focusing their efforts over the summer to help Andy get clean. With the understanding that Andy's progress would be carefully monitored, and with support of the YSP, the team agreed to allow Andy to attempt this ultimately successful method.

"We ended up not putting Andy in any form of rehab," said Mike. "We gave him the opportunity to come clean on his own. He agreed to stop doing hard drugs and his mother

filled his summer with summer camps so that he wouldn't have access to drugs. He went through withdrawal at those camps and it was rough, but when he came home he looked so much better. The life and color had returned to his face."

The team recognized that this was not a typical approach to addiction; however the choice to move in this direction appears to have been successful for this young man and his family. One of the camps Andy attended focused on writing and proved to be a beneficial experience both to help him stay sober and for what he envisions as his future career.

"I got a full scholarship for the camp from a poem I wrote," said Andy. "The camp really made me realize I want to have a career and pursue higher education in writing. When I was on drugs I didn't really think about my future, but now I'm planning for it. I want to go to school for playwriting. I love theater, and my dream is to write for an off-Broadway company."

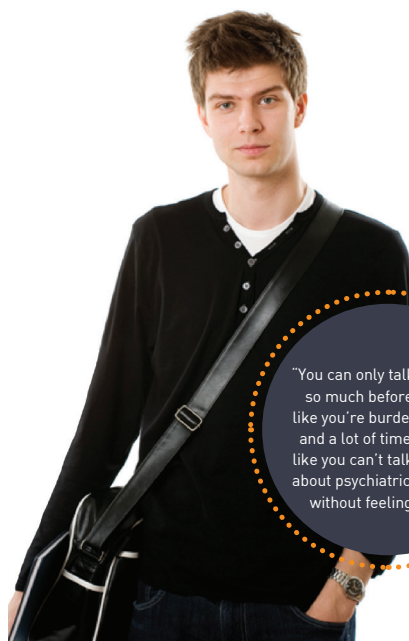
Andy admits that when he started using drugs he thought it was fun, but soon realized the negative impact it had on his life.

"You get burned out really fast," he said. "It's emotionally taxing for anyone that cares about you. My mom was really worried about me, and I didn't think about her when I was using drugs. Now that I'm clean, we talk a lot more and our relationship has really improved."

Mike sees Andy's story as the ideal outcome for any of the roles he has played with youth.

"The ultimate goal is to help families and help youth be able to do things on their own and be functional," said Mike. "In Andy's case, I think he's right on track to achieve great things in his life and be an amazing professional writer. He really has the ability and the passion, and now that he has a better handle on his bipolar [diagnosis] and isn't on drugs, he can really focus on his life goals. He also has a much

stronger relationship with his mother and their family is able to flourish and be a healthy environment for everyone."



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