

By Marc Cherna



In November 2008, the Department of Human Services (DHS) in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, hired four Youth Support Partners (YSPs), young adults who had graduated from the foster care system, or another DHS child-serving system, and trained them as peer-to-peer mentors and advocates for youth at risk of, or currently residing in out-of-home placement. Nearly four years later, the YSP Unit today is a successful and effective component of DHS's continuum of services for these youth. The unit employs 15 YSPs and four youthful coaches/supervisors, is run by a full-time manager, and has supported more than 430 youth in a number of DHS programs (e.g., Hi-Fidelity Wraparound, programs serving youth in the Juvenile Justice and Shelter systems).



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Youth Support Partners: Building Trust and Improving Service Delivery for Youth

Making the decision to hire young adults who were recovering from traumatic pasts, and pairing them with challenging teens, required a leap of faith, but it was one DHS was willing to take to achieve better outcomes for our youth. Based on the initial successes of the four original YSPs, DHS parlayed resources to hire more YSPs and create an entire unit. We reasoned that a unit would provide the structure to make it easier to provide dedicated supervision, intensive training, and uniquely structured performance expectations, as well as to build a community of enthusiastic staff who support and reinforce each other's work and passion.

In addition to increasing trust and improving service delivery for the youth, the YSPs have been able to bring a new perspective to the system.

Admittedly, the experience has not been without its struggles. Initial reactions to their hiring ranged from qualified support to outright hostility. Because it is imperative that the YSPs have credibility with the youth *and* possess the type of personality that allows them to gain their trust, the most successful YSPs are typically tough, street-wise, and relatively inexperienced. As a result, particular emphasis has been placed on intensive training and supervision that supports these unseasoned employees in effective interactions with both youth and colleagues. Amanda Hirsh, YSP unit manager, helps them learn how to walk the delicate line between developing their professionalism and maintaining their "street credibility." Common issues of boundary setting, over-dependence on the part of the youth,

and over-involvement on the part of the YSPs are dealt with honestly and directly by the YSP leadership team, and, when necessary, by a trained clinical psychologist.

The YSPs have proven themselves to be valuable members of the team, so much so that Allegheny County Court judges are now likely to request that a YSP be included in cases that involve teens. "The youth whom we see in court often have limited relationships with healthy adults who can empathize with their current situation, yet offer realistic, practical advice for having a healthy life," said Administrative Judge Kathryn Hens-Greco of the Family Division. "Youth Support Partners take the time to connect with their youth, provide clear-sighted insights to the judge about the youth's current needs, and, by their example, display a future

path to the youth they mentor.” Some colleagues, initially skeptical of their capabilities, now express appreciation for the YSPs effectiveness in communicating with and motivating youth. “The YSPs are tireless in their efforts to meet with youth,” observed one child welfare caseworker. “And the families immediately recognize that having these young people talking to their children is something different. For me, getting a monthly home visit in can be like pulling teeth, but when the YSP comes they don’t mysteriously fail to answer the door.” Concerns about the risks of involving the YSPs in difficult situations have been minimized by implementing a credentialing system

designed to prepare them for a wide range of experiences; but mostly, fears have been alleviated by their track record of success and what they are achieving with youth. And the youth themselves? One young woman credits her YSP with helping her get her GED and driver’s license. Now studying social work at a community college, she says “I look at [the YSP] and think I want to be just like her: young, motivated, and inspirational.”

So what makes the YSPs so effective? Perhaps most significantly, they share similar personal experiences and a common perspective that allows them to build a trusting relationship with youth who might otherwise be

resistant to the advice and counsel of a professional. They are able to empathize with the youth they serve, while receiving extensive, ongoing training, and the support they need to maintain necessary boundaries.

For more information about Allegheny County’s YSP Unit, contact Amanda Hirsh at amanda.hirsh@diversifiedcaregmt.com. To read about the YSPs’ experiences in their own words, go to <http://www.allegheny-county.us/dhs/research-cyf.aspx>.

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