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Implementing the Peer Support Specialist Role: Peer Support in a Youth-led Drop-in Center

This information brief gives an overview of Youth MOVE Oregon, an innovator in peer-led services for youth. The role and development of Peer Support Providers is discussed in some detail along with organizational challenges that need to be addressed.



Overview of the Program

Youth MOVE Oregon (YMO) is a chapter of Youth MOVE National, a youth- and young adult-led initiative with chapters all over the country. Its goal is to improve services for youth and young adults who are involved in various systems such as mental health, juvenile justice, addictions, and child welfare. The national organization supports the development of community-based chapters throughout the country by providing a small grants program and general technical support.

YMO receives funding from SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) and Oregon CCOs (Coordinated Care Organizations), and applies for federal and state funding. YMO also

partners with state and county governments to connect with other youth-focused organizations. These connections expand awareness of youth services and resources while enhancing YMO's capabilities.

YMO is taking a lead role in developing peer-led services in Oregon and beyond. YMO offers workshops, trainings, community, and drop-in centers, all provided by youth for youth. The young people who work for YMO have gained skills in curriculum development, public speaking and advocacy, grant writing, and the creation of community partnerships.

Youth MOVE Oregon has sites in Washington Coun-

ty, Grants Pass, Salem, Eugene and Milwaukie, OR. Currently, the location in Milwaukie is a drop-in center that creates a safe space and also offers a

number of services. This center employs four direct workers, known as Peer Support Providers (PSPs), who work with youth.

The Role of Peer Support Providers

YMO's PSPs are hired based on their life experiences, not academic achievement. Some PSPs are in high school and some are in college, but all have had experiences either in foster care, juvenile justice, mental health services, or other services.

"If you can convince us that you have useful knowledge of the systems and have passion about changing them, and helping youth not have the same negative experiences that you have, that's really what we're looking for."

It is also common for PSPs to have experience using services provided by YMO; three of the current employees at the Milwaukie drop-in center participated in services and programming offered by YMO. Peer support providers receive certification in a curriculum called Intentional Peer Support that is offered throughout the state.

Whenever possible, YMO uses a "dual supervision" model to improve the skills of PSPs. Dual supervision has clinical and peer delivered components. Through a contract with the county mental health system, PSPs have access to training on the clinical aspects of their work. The peer delivered component consists of weekly coaching sessions with PSP supervisors. These sessions focus on topics like ethics and the PSP's own self-development. Just like YMO youth, outcomes for PSP development are measured according to the Search Institute's list of 40 key developmental assets (www.search-institute.org/research/developmental-assets). Following through on their own development allows PSPs to fully appreciate the challenges faced by YMO's youth as they develop through the program.

Peer Support in a Drop-in Center

Youth attend the Milwaukie drop-in center to gain assistance, improve skills, or simply to find community. In addition to being a safe and welcoming place for youth, the center provides access to computers and numerous recreational activities. Youth enjoy the center's pool table, chess games, and Wii. They can also prepare meals in the center's small kitchen and relax by watching TV.

The center's reputation among youth speaks for itself. Most youth learn about the center by word of mouth from their peers. The center maintains its popularity among youth without engaging in elaborate advertising campaigns.

Youth are welcomed into the center community gradually, engaging with staff and peers at their own pace. Once a youth has dropped in a couple

of times, peer support providers invite the youth to sign a contract that outlines goals for youth to achieve. Youth agree to:

1. *Stay in school and be working towards graduation or getting a GED.* Continue to learn, whether through college, in other areas of life, or through the YMO leadership curriculum.
2. *Obey the law.* This includes not engaging in illegal activity outside of YMO, such as the use of illegal drugs or intentionally speeding. (The following situations are not in violation of this commitment: undocumented immigrant status, homeless and camping or sleeping on the streets, or nonviolent civil disobedience in political action.)

3. *Identify and follow life assignments.* (Youth create their own life assignments based on their values and goals. Life assignments can be about world change, career aspirations, personal growth, culture, etc.)

If the youth is unwilling to sign, they are asked to leave until they are ready to sign the contract. Most youth respond favorably to taking on these challenges. It is estimated that only about 10% of youth who visit the center have chosen to not sign the contract.

For those who do sign, the possibilities are numerous. Youth either self-select a PSP or are assigned to one who has similar life experiences. PSPs give time and space to new youth, allowing them to initiate conversations or interactions. If, after a couple of visits, this interaction does not happen, the PSP will approach the youth and try to engage her or him in an activity or conversation. This manner of engagement highlights the importance of meeting youth where they are and letting them guide the process. Once the interaction occurs and rapport is built, the PSP can move on to the next steps of directed conversation and goal setting.

PSPs work alongside the youth to discover his or her particular set of strengths. Together, the PSP and youth figure out what other skills would be useful to work on given the youth's interests and goals. The PSPs acknowledge that not all assets are relevant for all youth. However, simply gaining one asset is still considered a success!

Challenges

YMO is challenged by the high demand for youth peer-led services. Currently, the Milwaukie branch employs only four PSPs. Despite laptops and cell phones, the sheer size of Clackamas County (where the center is located) makes it difficult to reach all of the youth that would benefit. Currently, the drop-in center is open three hours a day (3 PM – 6 PM) during the week. There are no other organizations that offer similar services, despite the obvious need. This results in a limited variety of op-

Whether they work with youth face-to-face, through Facebook or text, PSPs support youth in developing their assets and working towards life assignments. Towards this end, youth can also participate in workshops, such as YMO's signature leadership development program, which takes place over a period of 36 weeks.

"It's [the experience at the drop-in center] almost different for every single youth that walks through this door... Some kids literally just sit in a chair in the corner with their headphones in and don't talk to anyone or do anything – and if that's where they're at right now, that's great. We're hoping they get to a place where they reach out to us and want those peer delivered services. But they may be working on resumes or school assignments in the computer lab, job apps, GED stuff. It's really their choice of what level of involvement they want to have. You may do that initial asset assessment and they may never do one-on-one again. They may come back later and need help. It's just really youth led and youth guided."

All PSPs have cell phones so that they are accessible to youth in the community. Drop-in hours are limited, but peer support providers often meet youth in the community to continue working. PSPs will meet youth at coffee shops, at school, or anywhere else the youth requests so as to truly meet them where they are. This flexibility also offers more opportunities to gain new skills and work on current ones, such as budgeting and accessing community resources.

tions for youth who are experiencing a crisis. They can drop in to the center during open hours or they can contact a PSP to meet with them. However, there are only four PSPs and two must be available at the center for it to be open.

Although awareness of the benefits of youth peer-led and -delivered services is beginning to spread, funding remains a challenge that limits YMO's growth. Oftentimes, YMO's director of peer-deliv-

ered services will need to meet with other agencies as well as state leaders in order to advocate for funding and services. Sustaining current fund-

ing levels and generating new sources of revenue will be critical to YMO's continued effectiveness.

Conclusion

Nationally, Oregon's Youth MOVE chapters are recognized as leaders in innovation. YMO not only offers youth-delivered support, but does so in a way that is truly youth-led. Its success rests on a foundation of relationship building and respect for youth. This approach produces an atmosphere of trust in which youth are supported to pursue positive changes on their own terms.

"I don't know if it's just the population we're working with, if they really need that community

piece; I do know that for a lot of them, we might be the only positive thing in their life...They may not have traditional parents or grandparents, or anyone, which may be part of why they want a group; they want to build a community rather than just a one-on-one relationship. When we bring Youth MOVE to a community, we just bring the building blocks and the youth in that community make it want they need it to be."

Acknowledgment

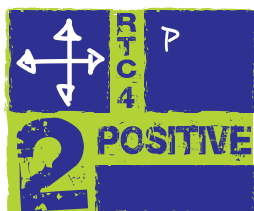
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