



How can Youth Support Partners create **stronger engagement with child welfare-involved youth?**

When Taylor¹ was 12, her mom brought a new boyfriend into their family. The changes that followed, including new rules and new siblings, left Taylor feeling like she didn't know where she fit anymore. "I felt unheard, and I got angry at everyone," she recalls. She began fighting at home and at school. One night, after an argument with her stepfather, Taylor was charged with assault and resisting arrest. She and her family found themselves involved with several offices within the Allegheny County (Pa.) Department of Human Services (DHS).

Her team included a child welfare caseworker, a juvenile probation officer, and a mental health services coordinator. Taylor remembers feeling overwhelmed: "Sometimes they used words I didn't understand. I tried to tell them how I felt, but there were too many of them and I had too much to say." This frustration resulted in angry outbursts during team meetings, making it increasingly difficult for Taylor to get her needs met.

At one meeting, a new team member appeared: Ashley,² who represented DHS's brand-new [Youth Support Partners \(YSP\) program](#). When they met, Taylor says, "I was already at a 100: upset and screaming. She took me for a walk, and we talked. I didn't make the best first impression, but I liked her." After that initial meeting, Ashley became a consistent, positive presence in Taylor's life as she



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moved through several more schools, placements, and other transitions on her way to adulthood.

What is a Youth Support Partner (YSP)?

Youth Support Partners are young adults with lived experience in child welfare, behavioral health, or juvenile justice, funded by DHS to promote youth empowerment and voice in decision-making at the individual and system level, as well as enhance the department's engagement with youth ages 14 to 21. Allegheny County has grown the YSP program for the past 10 years as part of a [complement of innovative approaches](#) instituted under the leadership of DHS Director Marc Cherna. The goals of the YSP program include:

- Ensuring that youth are heard and considered in planning for their future as well as for the evolution of DHS.
- Helping other professionals communicate more effectively with youth.

YSPs do not replace caseworkers. They work alongside other staff to help youth identify and achieve their own goals. The program currently serves approximately 350 youth through a unit that includes 35 YSPs, eight supervisor-coaches, and several program managers and support staff.

The YSP program began with a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Systems of Care (SOC) grant — Partnership for Youth in Transition — that enhanced the high fidelity wraparound model for teaming. As that program was developing, YSPs became part of a bundled team that also included a caseworker/facilitator and Family Support Partner

(FSP). FSPs provide [peer-to-peer support to parents](#). Since that time, DHS has received subsequent SOC grants and funding from child welfare and private foundations to support and expand the work of the YSP unit.

Today, although YSPs continue to employ a team approach, they also offer support to a youth independent of a FSP, depending on the family's unique needs. Originally focused on youth with behavioral health challenges, the program has expanded over time to serve youth who are involved with juvenile probation or child welfare, or have intellectual disabilities. Most recently, the county has been exploring its applicability for youth with chronic illnesses. YSPs are highly supported across DHS and with the judicial system.

How does the program work?

Staff from across program areas may refer any eligible youth who they believe would benefit from the additional support of a YSP. Each youth is carefully matched with a YSP who shares similar life experiences and gender identity (unless the youth requests otherwise). Conflicts of interest sometimes arise, particularly for younger YSPs who were more recently in care themselves and may know the youth, the child welfare caseworker, or family members. All of these factors are considered during the matching process to achieve a suitable match.

Working with a YSP is **entirely voluntary**. It is the youth's choice to move forward from the referral, even when the referral is court ordered. Once assigned to a case, the YSP visits with the youth, explains the program, and offers support. Choosing whether to

I had a lot of caseworkers and system providers come and go, but my Youth Support Partner remained the same ... I had her for five years and our relationship created stability. Today, that experience gives me the courage to create stability for my own son.

— FORMER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

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work with a YSP is often the first time youth have been offered a say in the composition of their team.

Youth also help determine the frequency of meetings. Some meet with their YSP once a week, some as little as once a month. During meetings, discussions focus on whatever the youth want to talk about. Ideally, YSPs help youth identify and make progress toward goals. However, particularly at the outset, meetings may be less structured as the YSPs build trust with the youth. Many YSPs also communicate with their youth via phone and text between meetings.

Once trust is established, YSPs support youth in a myriad of ways, often working on concrete skills that the youth identify. In Taylor's case, she and Ashley worked a great deal on communicating her needs more effectively and practiced maintaining composure when frustrated. "Ashley was always very honest," Taylor recalls. "She talked freely, so I could connect with her. If I did something wrong, she'd tell me to get my act together — that's what I needed." Ashley also helped Taylor learn how to navigate the local transit system, which opened new opportunities to Taylor for securing employment and visiting her friends.

Meanwhile, YSPs help child welfare caseworkers and other system providers by supporting better communication with the youth they are serving. Their lived experience often is essential to bridging communication gaps. "They [YSPs] may have shared the same feelings and been confused about some of these things as youth themselves," says Amanda Hirsh, YSP unit director. "But now they see it through a different lens from the other side and can understand some of the things (decisions made) that happened to them. They see the bigger picture and can help translate that for the youth."

Youth report back that they value their YSPs for their shared experience, authenticity, and willingness to share power with them. As a result, very few youth decline YSP services — **the program has a greater than 90% engagement rate.**

Getting other staff to accept YSPs as equals hasn't always been easy. "It took a while for the YSPs to earn the respect of the caseworkers," Hirsh recalls. "Some were former youth on their caseloads, and suddenly they were their paid peers." She notes that **buy-in and commitment from administrators at the highest level**, up to and including DHS Director Cherna, have been critical to their acceptance.

Today, YSPs regularly participate in DHS' Office of Children, Youth and Families staff orientation to share the youth perspective, highlight the importance of youth voice, and talk about the services they offer. In addition, the unit has done a lot of direct relationship building with other DHS staff. Hirsh says: "We spend a lot of time going around talking about who we are and what we do, asking, 'How can we help you?'" Once caseworkers see how a YSP can further their goals — by encouraging a reluctant teen to return a caseworker's phone call or engage more actively in meetings — they become believers.

"The YSPs have earned the respect they get today," says Hirsh, adding that judges also are supportive of the program and will listen and take into consideration what YSPs have to say.

Other YSP unit services

In addition to one-on-one support, the YSP unit has branched out in recent years to provide

When I was a teenager and first diagnosed with a mental illness, I didn't know anyone else who had one. I didn't know what my life was going to look like. I tell my youth: 'Your path may look a little different, but you can still accomplish so many things.'

— YOUTH SUPPORT PARTNER

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group-based services for youth, including facilitation and/or oversight of:

- **Opportunity Passport™**, a Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative model, is a financial literacy program for youth ages 14 to 24. Youth get paid to attend sessions and can earn a dollar-for-dollar match up to \$3,000 for the purchase of an asset, such as a vehicle or apartment deposit.
- **S.I.T.Y.** (Systems Improvement Through Youth) is Allegheny County's youth-run advisory board. Staff from various county programs attend meetings to seek advice about program development and marketing from system-involved youth. The group also plans team-building outings for the advisory board members.
- **We Rock** provides an opportunity for youth ages 14 to 21 to create music and artwork for a record album, in partnership with a local studio and professional singer. The program also stages a live performance at a local theater each year.

Staffing

A decade of experience has taught Allegheny County a lot about hiring and training successful YSPs. Hirsh recalls: "One of the earliest challenges was to figure out how to teach and maintain the balance of being youthful while teaching them how to be professional and respectful; not losing their 'reliability.'"

Today, Allegheny County's hiring formula includes a unique combination of flexible eligibility requirements with extensive interviewing and training. Educational requirements are low by design: the job only requires a high school diploma or GED. Lived experience is the most important job requirement, along with a passion or interest in helping other youth. Hirsh notes, "Most successful applicants want to give back or have a

desire to make it better for those who follow them in the system." Incoming YSPs are given six months to obtain a vehicle and a driver's license (previously a condition of hiring), and the unit supports them in applying for grants to fulfill that requirement.

Interviews are rigorous nonetheless. They are conducted by several panels and include a behavior rehearsal (or role-playing scenario). "There are certain things that you can't teach, and that's what we're on the lookout for," Hirsh says. "We allow staff to make mistakes but we want staff members who are willing to listen, take constructive feedback, learn, and try new things."

Successful candidates are rewarded with a well-paid professional position with benefits. For many, it is their first professional or desk job. The salary is competitive for the Pittsburgh metro area, and has enabled many of the staff to achieve goals such as marriage, parenthood, home ownership, and obtaining guardianship of younger family members.

Despite these advantages, the unit faces challenges in staffing to capacity and currently has a wait list of about 30 youth seeking YSP services. The unit has had a particularly difficult time hiring and retaining male YSPs. Once hired, it takes time to bring each new YSP up to a full caseload because the county proceeds on a principle of "Do no harm."

"The worst thing we could do is send someone out who is too fresh or ill-prepared, and for them to get caught up in a young person's situation and make it worse instead of better," Hirsh explains. "So we don't rush it." The long ramp-up period includes coaching the staff to meet the unit's core components, extensive shadowing of experienced YSPs, teaching essential skills, and completing a Strengths-based Family Workers class, which is a college-level course paid

At first I thought, 'I don't know if I want to work with you.' But then (my YSP) said, 'I've been in care, too.' I said, 'For real? Then you know what I'm going through!'

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have been hired themselves. The potential for individual growth and healing for each YSP is tremendous. Perhaps one of the more gratifying changes that has emerged over time is how the entire human services system in Allegheny County engages with and listens to youth. YSP influence can now be seen in many agency policies and practices, from the enhanced orientation curriculum for new staff to the involvement of youth in the department's mental health first-aid training. The impact is felt and spread across systems, including education, human services, and probation. Youth voice has grown from occasional token input by one or two youth, to robust participation by youth and YSPs in all forms of program planning and advisory capacity across DHS and among its system partners. What started as four young people working in a fourth floor

office has exploded into something far bigger, opening the world for youth and their YSPs, as well as opening DHS to the truth about youth experience.

For Taylor, having a YSP meant having someone in her corner when it felt like the world was against her. As she and Ashley worked together, Taylor rebuilt self-worth and a sense of belonging. This resulted in fewer fights, more effective communication, and greater mental wellness. As she exhibited more self-control in meetings, and with the support of Ashley's reports of positive changes, the tone of family team meetings shifted. Instead of the team being exclusively focused on Taylor, the group began to develop goals for other members of the family, as well. Family relationships gradually improved. Today, Taylor is a successful high school graduate and paying it forward as a YSP herself.

1 Taylor's real name is not being used in order to protect her privacy.

2 Ashley's real name is not being used in order to protect her privacy.

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