



Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs

*A handbook developed by
The National Building Bridges Initiative's
Youth and Family Partnership Workgroup
in collaboration with the BBI Youth Advisory Group*

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

| | |
|--|-----------|
| I. OVERVIEW..... | 1 |
| II. PREPARING YOUR ORGANIZATION FOR PEER YOUTH ADVOCATES..... | 4 |
| A) Adopt Core Values as a Foundation | |
| B) Develop a Comprehensive Plan | |
| C) Engage Staff in the Change Process | |
| D) Embrace Change | |
| D) Clarify the Role of the Peer Youth Advocate | |
| E) Prepare Youth in the Program | |
| III. HIRING, TRAINING, SUPERVISING AND SUPPORTING PEER YOUTH ADVOCATES..... | 22 |
| A) Hiring | |
| B) Orientation and Training | |
| C) Supervision and Support | |
| D) Challenges and Opportunities – Notes from the Field | |
| IV. REFERENCES..... | 34 |

APPENDICES ARE AVAILABLE ON THE BBI WEBSITE

www.buildingbridges4youth.org

Table of Contents

- Appendix A: Acknowledgements and Contributors
- Appendix B: Glossary
- Appendix C: Contacts for More Information: Peer Youth Advocates, Residential Program Leaders, Consultants and Researchers
- Appendix D: Examples of Peer Youth Advocate Job Descriptions
- Appendix E: Training, Tips and Tools, and Youth Lead Advisory Councils
- Appendix F: Related Resources and Websites
- Appendix G: Bibliography

The National Building Bridges Initiative

To learn more about the **National Building Bridges Initiative (BBI)** and to access white papers, tip sheets and other tools to promote best practices and positive outcomes for youth and families, please visit the BBI website: www.buildingbridges4youth.org

Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs: Handbook

The Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs Handbook provides a conceptual framework and links to specific tools and technical assistance resources for organizations interested in expanding youth voice and adding Peer Youth Advocate (PYA) positions to their teams.

Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs: Appendices

In the course of preparing this handbook, many sample documents were gathered and compiled in a set of appendices. These are available on the BBI website. We hope that this archive will continue to grow as more and more organizations hire Peer Youth Advocates. Please submit anything you feel is relevant to share with others by emailing Beth Caldwell at bethcaldwell@roadrunner.com.

Contact Information for Technical Assistance

To find contact information for organizations, trainers, researchers, and others with experience integrating PYAs into residential programs, please refer to Appendix A, available on the BBI website as noted above.



Acknowledgments

The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) gratefully acknowledges the support and commitment of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). BBI was initiated and has been sustained through SAMHSA's leadership.

The Building Bridges Initiative would like to extend our sincere gratitude to AFYA, Inc., a technical and professional services firm that was established in 1991 to positively impact the health and well-being of all, with a special focus on underserved populations.

The Building Bridges Initiative would also like to acknowledge the sustaining support of Magellan Health Services, Inc. Their commitment to BBI principles and practices ensures that the voices of families and youth are foremost in providing guidance to the field on how to support successful engagement.

The generous support of SAMSHA, AFYA and Magellan made the development of this handbook possible and we are deeply appreciative.



Executive Summary

The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) is a growing national effort that promotes partnerships among residential and community providers, families, youth, advocates, and policy makers to achieve positive outcomes for youth and families touched by a residential intervention.

The BBI's Youth and Family Partnerships Workgroup and the BBI Youth Advisory Group collaborated to produce a handbook, *Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs*, to provide a conceptual framework and links to specific tools and technical assistance resources for organizations interested in expanding youth voice and adding Peer Youth Advocate (PYA) positions to their teams.

The recommendations contained in the handbook are largely based on the positive experiences of eleven residential provider organizations. Over 250 hours of interviews were conducted, with Peer Youth Advocates, clinicians, agency executives, researchers, provider association directors, and leaders in youth services policy. Youth who had lived or who were currently living in a residential program provided input through several focus groups.

Nationally, there has been a trend towards integrating peer services within traditional delivery systems for health and mental health care. Communities increasingly recognize the value of active involvement of youth in both the decision-making related to their own care and the design and governance of services and organizations. The development of the Peer Youth Advocate role has been an outgrowth of this desire to elevate youth voice.

For the purposes of this handbook, a Peer Youth Advocate (PYA) is an older adolescent or young adult with 'lived' experience. Ideally, this 'lived' experience is in the same system in which he or she is working. For example, a PYA in the foster care system would be a young person who has experienced foster care. At other times, the PYA has 'lived' experience in a different system, but shares common life experiences (e.g. stigma, being removed from their family and community, trauma) that allows him or her to make a connection with youth.

The PYA is a relatively new role in the field of children's services, so there is much to be gained from active discussion of what approaches are helpful and effective. Residential program CEOs, clinical professionals, PYAs and youth who were interviewed for this handbook clearly articulated that the addition of the PYA to their teams (and the attendant reassessment of values, practices and training) had a profound and positive impact on the way their programs operated, on engagement, and on outcomes for youth.

These same respondents also hasten to point out that the path to success was uneven and that success was dependent upon sustained leadership vision and commitment; organizational culture change; the adoption of new practices; training; and, ongoing problem-solving.



This handbook is not intended to provide a prescriptive program model, but to communicate some of what has been learned already to ‘jump start’ other programs’ implementation.

Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs includes guidance on topics such as: how to define the PYA role, a hiring checklist, relevant personnel policy considerations, preparing youth in the program for the new PYA role, engaging staff in the change process, training, supporting the PYA’s personal and professional development and, the importance of aligning the organization’s values and practices to support the overarching goal of improving outcomes through youth-guided practice.

In addition to the narrative that follows, a set of appendices can be found on the BBI website. These appendices include helpful articles and pertinent tools, such as job descriptions and training outlines. These resources can support and accelerate the adoption of similar efforts by reducing the need to ‘reinvent the wheel’. All readers are encouraged to submit new tools and information concerning PYAs and their work to support youth-guided care.

For more information on the Building Bridges Initiative and to download a copy of the handbook, ***Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs*** and the accompanying ***Appendices***, please visit www.buildingbridges4youth.org.



Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs

I. Overview

The *Peer Youth Advocates in Residential Programs* handbook was developed by the national Building Bridges Initiative for organizations interested in expanding youth voice by adding Peer Youth Advocate (PYA) positions to their teams.

The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) builds partnerships among residential and community providers, families, youth, advocates, and policy makers to achieve positive outcomes for youth and families touched by a residential intervention. This growing national effort promotes best practice principles and practices for residential and community programs serving youth with emotional and/or behavioral challenges and their families.

This handbook was developed by the members of the BBI Youth and Family Partnership Workgroup, with input and support from the BBI Youth Advisory Group, whose members from across the country all have ‘lived’ experience in residential programs.

Information was gathered through a review of relevant literature, focus groups with youth, and interviews with staff and PYAs from eleven residential programs, researchers, provider association directors, and experts on youth services policy. The eleven programs represent different regions of the country, urban and rural settings, a range of different size programs, and programs licensed by different child serving systems.

The collective wisdom and passion of those interviewed to promote youth-guided care makes this handbook a valuable resource for all residential programs and their community counterparts. Interviewees were asked to recommend helpful articles and to submit pertinent tools and sample documents from their programs, making this a very practical resource as well.

Nationally, there has been a trend towards integrating peer services within traditional delivery systems.

Mental health peer support and advocacy grew out of the civil and human rights movements and seeks not only to support and empower those served, but also to organize in order to achieve broader changes in policy and practice. In adult mental health services, certified or credentialed Adult Peer Advocates are able to access a variety of funding sources, including Medicaid. This is the current direction for Family Peer Advocates and PYAs, as well. A growing number of residential programs have begun to adopt youth-guided practices and to hire PYAs.

“For 17 & 18 year old youth in [child welfare], out of home placement or residential care they have NO hope. The youth advocates show them HOPE and that they too can be successful! The youth advocates also show staff how to help youth move forward.”

Steve Elson, CEO
Casa Pacifica, CA

Who is a Peer Youth Advocate?

A PYA is a youth or young adult generally between the ages of 16-25 (sometimes older) with 'lived' experience. Ideally, this 'lived' experience is in the same system in which he or she is working. For example, a PYA in the foster care system would be a young person who has experienced foster care. At other times, the PYA has 'lived' experience in a different system, but shares common life experiences (e.g. stigma, being removed from their family and community, experiences of trauma) that allows him or her to make a connection with youth.

"The greatest success was how quickly the youth advocate was able to integrate into the program and how staff is now asking for another advocate."

Bryan Lary, Program Director
Cohannet Academy, MA

Cultural and linguistic competence, in all of its dimensions, is important to the authenticity and success of work with youth. The PYAs interviewed for this handbook emphasized that the 'connection' between PYAs and the youth with whom they work comes from their shared youth culture and their common experiences as peers.

What is the Role of a Peer Youth Advocate?

The role, job description and title of each PYA will vary based on factors such as the needs and vision of the organization, funding, the type of program, the needs and preferences of the youth, and the skills of the PYA. There are common themes and activities that are emerging as this role is more widely adopted.

Lombrowski (2009) outlines some of roles and activities that are common for a PYA:

- **Peer Advocacy** - Advocating for a young person through the child-serving systems using personal experience as a framework. Advocates also mentor young people in how to learn to advocate for themselves.
- **Peer Support** - One-on-one mentoring and listening that taps into the personal experience of the youth advocate.
- **Youth Group Facilitation** - A youth advocate may help organize and/or facilitate youth groups within their organization. These may be either support groups or activity groups. This may be a way to provide peer support in a group setting.
- **Systems Advocacy and Activism** Participating on boards or committees, giving public testimony at hearings, and speaking directly to [local and state government] officials are just a few of the ways that youth advocates can be involved in systems change.

- **Public Speaking** Sharing personal stories of hope and recovery, or participating in or facilitating workshops and trainings are just some of the ways that youth advocates can be involved in public speaking.
- **Youth Partnering/Peer Partnering** Young people are often asked to sit in on treatment planning meetings, sometimes known as Child & Family Team Meetings, Family Team Conferences, Wraparound Meetings, or Service Plan Reviews. One of the roles of the youth advocate may be to help young people prepare for their meeting so they can advocate for themselves, by providing support, resources, and coaching and, on occasion, with the consent of the young person, speaking on behalf of the young person being served.
- **Youth Engagement & Involvement** Engaging in and involving other youth in how to become effective youth advocates and leaders on boards, in public policy and legislative activities.
- **Youth Coordination** Creating the space and the opportunities to make the above activities possible. This can include arranging space for meetings, identifying transportation, and fundraising for events, among other things.

To better understand peer youth advocacy and the consumer perspective and recovery principles please see the following documents in Appendix E:

- Youth Advocacy 101
- Western Massachusetts Recovery Learning Community Principles
- Susan's Story
- Understanding Consumer Perspectives

Appendices can be found on the BBI Website: www.buildingbridges4youth.org



II. Preparing Your Organization for Peer Youth Advocates

A. Adopt Core Values as a Foundation

A review of the literature on peer advocacy, as well as the interviews conducted for this handbook, highlighted the importance of several core values that create a foundation for effectively integrating PYAs into an organization.

PYAs can play an important role by influencing staff attitudes and nurturing change in the organization's culture. For the PYA to be most effective, the organization as a whole will have values and practice goals that are consistent with the goals of peer youth advocacy. This would include being:

"In our theory of change... relationships trump services. Change happens through relationships and that includes face time to develop trust - relationship building."

Jeremy Kohomban,
President and CEO
Children's Village, NY

Adept at Fostering Hope, Resilience and Recovery

Focus on each youth's strengths, be empathetic and equip youth with practical skills and strategies to help them thrive. Youth being served in out-of-home programs face many challenges and can feel overwhelmed by their life experiences. Working in an organization that embraces these values, PYAs can support these youth by infusing a sense of hope, fostering resiliency, promoting recovery, and guiding youth to positive, purposeful futures. The PYA facilitates this process by ensuring that the idea of recovery is made real, visible and tangible for youth who are still in residential programs. Liz Pepin describes the unique capacity of peers to promote recovery:

For most of my life I felt that I was unheard and had to struggle with my illnesses alone, making it much more difficult to recover. Since working with young adults through mentoring, I now see that many feel the same way that I did while going through this period of my life. I feel that because I share similar experiences with my peers we are able to connect on a much deeper, more personal level than, say, a psychiatrist or therapist who has not had the lived experience of mental illness. (Butman, 2009)

Friesen (2005), proposes that 'recovery concepts and resiliency knowledge' can add value to children's services though a focus on strengths as well as a more inclusive approach to planning and defining outcomes.

The outcomes that are important under a resilience and recovery framework are different from those often measured to evaluate either treatment or system effectiveness. For example, outcomes such as optimism or quality of life are rarely measured. Families and youth should be fully engaged in defining resilience and recovery-oriented outcomes, both for their own individualized plans and for service systems as a whole.



Protective factors – including community-level strengths and assets – should receive greater attention in treatment planning. There is a need to expand knowledge about how to create treatment plans that effectively build on strengths and assets. (p. 8)

Culturally and Linguistically Competent

Often, culture is understood in terms of race, ethnicity and language, but it also has to do with family traditions, gender, disability, spiritual beliefs, sexual orientation, personal interests, placement history, and other dimensions of how youth define themselves. Organizations that have an active, ongoing plan to promote cultural and linguistic competence are more likely to be an environment in which peer youth advocacy can flourish.

“There is cultural diversity within ‘youth culture.’ All youth are not alike. For youth of marginalized groups, the issue of race, ethnicity, religion, language drives how they are treated by both adults and other youth in combination to their membership in youth culture. The culture of the ‘family’ is [also] nested within and interacts with larger cultural contexts.”

Vivian Jackson
Senior Policy Associate
National Center for Cultural Competency

As Sieler, et al (2009) observe, cultural and linguistic competence and valuing youth voice go hand-in-hand:

[When] a community truly embraces and celebrates the value of youth voice, they will also understand the significance of services and supports that are developmentally and culturally appropriate and appealing to youth and young adults. (p. 134)

[It is necessary] to adjust strategies to serve youth and young adults with various diversities.... The tailoring of services and supports for one young person will look very different from those of another young person. (p. 125-126)

PYAs play an important role both engagement and in guiding youth to explore and articulate their own values and beliefs – and to find their voice. The PYAs may be better able to see things from the youth’s perspective, help youth identify their personal and cultural strengths, and figure out how these assets can be part of an individualized wellness and recovery plan.

Language can also be a barrier to achieving a full partnership with the youth and family. PYAs can help ‘translate’ clinical language and jargon.

If a program is able to hire PYAs who speak a language (other than English) that is spoken by the youth in the program, this too can be helpful. In times of stress or crisis, PYAs can converse in the youth’s language of choice which helps establish trust and a bond.

Youth-guided and Youth-run

One lesson the youth movement has learned from adult peer advocate programs is that these programs need to be consumer-run and directed and not coercive (Mead and McNeal, 2006).

Organizations can create protocols to ensure that youth are actively involved in shaping their own service plans and ensure they have the information they need to make informed decisions. In an organization that values youth-guided practice, PYAs are not only role-models of what is possible, but also can coach young people on how to make it real and accomplish *their* life goals - not just the program's goals.

PYAs can play a powerful role in opening up the lines of communication. PYAs work with youth to gain their trust and support them to express

*“**Youth Guided** means that young people have the right to be **empowered, educated, and given a decision making role in the care of their own lives as well as the policies and procedures governing care for all youth in the community, state and nation. This includes giving young people a **sustainable** voice and then **listening** to that voice. Youth guided organizations create safe environments that enable young people to gain **self-sustainability** in accordance with the cultures and beliefs with which they identify. Further, a youth guided approach recognizes that there is a continuum of **power** that should be shared with young people based on their understanding and maturity in a **strength based change process**. Youth guided organizations recognize that this process should be **fun and worthwhile.**”***

Youth Move National

themselves; they nurture partnerships between youth and other staff members, and they create opportunities for youth to have a voice in their own treatment and in the overall operation of the program.

It is critical to involve youth in the decisions that affect them. A recent report by the American Association of Children's Residential Centers (AACRC) (2010) highlights not only the concerns raised by youth about being excluded from the decision-making process, but also points out the missed opportunities (for the program and the youth themselves) that result from this:

Residential Providers often hear the praises of alumni for the help they received. Less often do the criticisms of youth past and present get the same attention. [The youth interviewed for the AACRC report] expressed a variety of concerns that they feel residential providers did not and do not hear. For example:

- Youth have often experienced staff attitudes and approaches that are patronizing and infer that the youth in care do not understand themselves as well as, or better than, the adults, this finds expression in decision making that, not only doesn't include the youth but

dismisses the possibility that they might have valuable ideas, perhaps even better than those of the staff.

- Young people often have not experienced meaningful opportunities to discuss or question placement or be engaged in formulating and carrying out their own treatment plans. They find themselves left with the choice of complying with set of provisions into which they had no input or



complaining, which could jeopardize their privileges or movement toward discharge. They ask that there be ‘nothing about us without us.’

The presence of a PYA signals a change in how the program views youth and serves as a powerful force in engaging youth and ‘translating’ between youth and adult program staff.

Developmentally Attuned and Responsive to Youth Culture

It is vital to educate staff about ‘typical’ teenage behavior because a common point of friction between youth and staff in residential programs is that staff lose sight of what is an age-appropriate behavior (e.g. not cleaning room; putting off showering, or being sullen) as a sign that there is something seriously wrong as opposed to just behaviors seen in most teenagers. Training and coaching can guide staff to interpret behavior and engage with youth in ways that ‘fit’ developmentally.

In addition, organizations that recognize the existence of ‘youth culture’ may have more success engaging youth.

As Matarese, McGinnis, Mora (2005) point out, respecting youth culture is akin to learning about and developing respect for any other culture.

The gap that occurs in youth-adult relationships is often rooted in one thing: understanding. To say it is difficult to understand another culture is an understatement. Fully understanding a different culture may be a bit too ambitious, but respecting it is something we can all do. All diverse groups have a unique culture that makes up who they are, and all diverse groups deserve to be valued and respected. Youth culture is no exception.

“The transition for a youth in our program out of foster care was not the best and he eventually ended up in a homeless shelter. From the shelter he was referred to an Institute for Community Living (ICL) program and had a very rocky start until he was introduced to the Peer Advocate. Then things began to change; he started to trust ICL. He successfully participated in a psychiatric rehabilitation program, he is in school, has quit smoking cigarettes and marijuana and he has served as a co-facilitator of a smoking cessation program. He has now applied for permanent housing.”

David Kamnitzer
Senior Vice President
Institute for Community Living, NY

Youth culture has its own set of rules and values. This has implications for how residential programs operate, particularly in terms of rules. While a young person in a residential program needs to follow the policies and rules of the program, those rules need to be developed from both a developmental and a youth culture perspective - not based on what is convenient for staff and administrators.

Respectful and Compassionate

Through open and regular dialogue, youth, PYAs, staff and clinical professionals can develop caring and respectful partnerships.

An organization that is open and committed to creating and fully supporting the meaningful involvement of youth will establish partnerships between youth and professionals that reflect and respect basic human needs. This includes: feeling safe, being connected to others, having hope when times are tough and deserving love and respect. It also helps youth develop confidence to make decisions and the right or power to make decisions that could change the course of their lives. (Buffington, 2008)

Given the prevalence of trauma in the lives of many youth in residential programs, the importance of trauma-informed practice approaches cannot be overstated. There are many resources on trauma-informed care, some of which can be found in the appendices. The PYA role, however, can reinforce strengthen the quality of relationships and encourage higher level of trust – both of which are necessary to achieving positive outcomes, especially for youth who have experienced trauma. This concept is well-articulated by Buffington (2008):

Partnerships foster dynamics essential to recovery. Trust, respect, and hope play critical roles in recovery from traumatic experiences. At the core of our existence as human beings are some basic needs: to be safe, to be connected to other human beings, to have hope in difficult times, to see ourselves as deserving of love and respect, to have confidence in our abilities to make decisions, and to have the power to direct and change lives. A system committed to creating meaningful partnerships between professionals and consumers respects and reflects these basic needs.

When service providers and systems take time to meaningfully involve consumers in efforts to change and improve services and systems of care, hope is created. In practical terms, consumer and professional partnerships demonstrate respect,

“In addition to creating an inclusive atmosphere where young adults’ ethnicity, race, culture, and sexual orientation are respected, program stakeholders are aware that young adults share a culture of their own to which older adults are not privy. The YA [young adult] culture has its own linguistic characteristics, fashion trends, high-tech communication, social hierarchy, values, and norms, as well as exclusive membership. The inclusion of Peer advocates in all aspects of the program has been an effective way of engaging young adults for the reason that their cultural similarity earns them a foot in the door with their cohorts.”

Galasso, et al, (2009)



address the issues that are important to consumers, and find solutions that work better than traditional approaches. (p. 2)

B. Develop a Comprehensive Plan

Allow time for a thorough planning process that addresses the areas outlined in this handbook. The program will need to establish a vision and core values or principles and then ensure that policies, staff and PYA training programs as well as PYA supervision and support structures are in place.

The Appendices to this handbook (available on the BBI website) include examples of many of the types of documents mentioned in this section (e.g. sample job descriptions, training outlines).

Following is a checklist of planning and preparation steps that have been recommended by other residential programs that have hired PYAs. These might serve as the basis for a committee to develop a more detailed work plan with assigned responsibilities and completion dates.

A Checklist for Hiring a Peer Youth Advocate

- ✓ Have full, unambiguous top management and program leadership support.
- ✓ Engage in organization-wide discussion and learning on the core values and principles that are tied to the PYA's role. Address staff concerns and engage in ongoing solution-focused problem-solving.
- ✓ Evaluate organizational policies and practices against these values.
- ✓ Evaluate and revise as necessary, agency policies and practices to reflect youth-guided principles.
- ✓ Ensure that youth from your program participate in the planning process.
- ✓ The PYA role can be isolating. Plan to hire at least two PYAs at the same time, preferably more.
- ✓ Identify experienced youth leaders from the community to serve as consultants during the preparation phase.

"It is really difficult for a PYA, if there is only one PYA to start If possible please consider hiring more than one advocate so they have a 'buddy' in the new role.

Each PYA has a story; they will need your support and coaching about how best to tell their story.

The program leadership also, has to mentor and support the peer mentors in professional work behaviors such as; how to dress appropriately for different situations, how to develop public speaking skills and appropriate topics they don't need to share."

Caroline McGrath
Executive Director
UMass Adolescent Programs, MA

- ✓ Involve members of the Board of Directors in the hiring process to gain their full support.
- ✓ Secure sufficient resources to provide a fair salary and benefits; this is critical to the recruitment and retention of high quality staff.
- ✓ Understand that PYA's are young persons, often still in school. A number of PYAs may still be involved in their own recovery process. Sensitivity and flexibility to their needs will help them be successful. Contact other programs to understand some of the flexible strategies that have been successful, such as later start times, safety planning for when a PYA needs time for personal recovery, and adjustment to school calendar for PYAs in school. Evaluate and revise employee policies, as needed.
- ✓ Write a clear job description prior to bringing the PYA on; do not define as you go!
- ✓ Develop a comprehensive training plan for the PYA.
- ✓ Develop a plan for ongoing flexible support and supervision.
- ✓ Train and orient all staff prior to bringing on a PYA. At a minimum include training on: youth-guided care; the role of PYA within the agency; and, cultural and linguistic competence, including youth culture. It will also be helpful to provide training that helps staff better understand child and adolescent development and adjust their practices and expectations accordingly.
- ✓ Plan for regular evaluations of the PYA role, and prepare for the fact that the PYA role will evolve and change over time.

More information is provided in subsequent chapters of this handbook on the following vital aspects of integrating this new role.

- Engaging Staff in the Change Process
- Deciding on Roles for the PYAs
- Preparing Youth in the Program

Administrative Considerations

The following provides some additional detail on a number of administrative and employee policy items on the checklist.

Funding: Sustaining what is still a 'non-traditional' position requires creativity. A few states have the position built into the Medicaid rate. Programs have made the best with limited funding streams, written government and foundation grants, used non-personnel services monies to have hourly worker

"We're aware of the culture of teenagers and transition age youth...the culture of the agency and the way staff work needs to be changed to reflect what the youth voice is saying."

Denis McCarville, CEO
Alaska Children's Services, AK

contracts or created new positions. Programs should review their plans to promote sustainability and staff retention. Also, if programs are hiring part time positions, the program may want to consider having the flexibility to add hours during school vacations and holidays (when the youth are not in school) to increase the PYAs availability.

(For more information, see *Fiscal Strategies that Support the Building Bridges Initiative*, a white paper on the BBI website.)

Review of personnel policies: Human resource staff should be trained about this new role and authorized to make some adjustments in standard policies to support these younger employees and their work. Some common issues identified by programs currently employing a PYA include:

- *Agency policies:* Update agency policies as needed vis-à-vis the PYA role. For example, the minimum age requirement that many agencies have may need to be lowered for a PYA position. Many other updates will be relevant to all staff, although some are especially needed when hiring staff members who are close in age to the youth receiving services. This would include, but not be limited to, policies on socialization, boundaries, relationships, social media, work skills, dress, etc. It is also necessary to define what constitutes an appropriate social connection once a youth leaves the program especially if part of the PYA assignment is to follow--up with youth once discharged, which can be a critical role for sustained success in the community.
- *Scheduling:* Allow for flexibility in the PYA's schedule so they are present when the youth are not in school (including evenings/weekends/vacations/holidays). Many PYAs are also in school, so it is important that the schedule is accommodating to the PYA, as well. Don't try to fit the PYA role into an existing shift schedule.
- *Retention:* Retention of PYAs can be an issue unless steps are taken to be flexible and consider the PYAs own development and plan for future opportunities within the agency. Discuss how the PYA might progress within the organization. Will there be a career ladder within the advocacy 'department' or would they potentially qualify to be hired in other roles in the organization?
- *Salary/Benefits:* When hiring, discuss whether the PYA is receiving any type of benefits (SSI, Medicaid, Title IV monies) and how their salary/ income will affect the benefits and whether the salary and benefit package is enough to justify giving up the benefits. It is important the PYA be given all the information necessary for them to make an informed decision regarding the number of hours they should work. Providing this type of information is helpful to young adults who may not be aware of all of the rules governing benefits.
- *Space:* Have a suitable space available for the PYA to meet with youth privately, host group events or just informally 'hang out'. Having the right space contributes to the success of the PYA. The space not only needs to be accessible and in a safe location, but youth must be reassured that the environment is a 'safe space' where youth are able to freely express



themselves and not worry about repercussions from staff, family or other youth.

- **Transportation:** Work-related transportation costs should be budgeted as they would be for any other staff member - with a few additional considerations. Where public transportation is not available, the PYA may need access to a car as many may not own their own vehicles. Also, develop a system to cover the costs of gas or parking (or fares in the case of PYAs using public transportation) without requiring the PYA to wait for reimbursement, which might pose a hardship.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Since the PYA position is new, the role involves a learning curve for the entire organization. If the PYA is doing the job right it will keep evolving, requiring the organization to continuously evaluate how the agency is doing and what changes are needed to create a truly youth-guided environment, where the voice of youth is respected and welcomed. Plan an evaluation approach and discuss how to improve and strengthen the impact of this role as a part of the continuous quality improvement process.

“It is a process for a few years of letting go of the rigidity and the rules. By adding a peer mentor they forced the staff to be less rigid. For example, youth challenged why a rule from the 1990’s was still in effect, this forced staff to look at things differently.”

Maria Tebeau, Program Director
North American Family Institute (NFI)
Chauncey Hall Academy, MA

Recommended Reading

Ashcraft, L. & Anthony, W. A. (2007). Tools for transformation: The value of peer employees, *Behavioral Healthcare*.

Bergeson, S. (Spring 2011). Cost effectiveness of using peers as providers. *Newsletter of the National Association of Peer Specialists*, 7 (2).

LeBel, J. & Stromberg, N. (Eds) (2008). Giving people a voice, choice, and role. *Creating positive cultures of care: A resource guide (2nd edition)*. Boston: Massachusetts Department of Mental Health.

Lombrowski, B., Fields, G., Griffin-Van Dorn, A., & Castillo, M. (2008). Youth advocates: What they do and why your wraparound program should hire one. In E. J. Bruns and J. S. Walker (Editors). *The Resource Guide to Wraparound, Wraparound Practice: Portland, Oregon: National Wraparound Initiative, Research and Training Center for Family Support and Children’s Mental Health*.

Mead, S., & MacNeil, C. (2006). Peer support: What makes it unique? *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 10 (2), 29-37.

Pires, S., & Wood, G. (2007). Effective strategies to finance family and youth partnerships, *University of South Florida, Issue Brief* 2.

Wolf, J., & Lawrence. (2010). Emerging practices in employment of persons in recovery in the mental health workforce. *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*, 13, 189-207.

C. Engage Staff in the Change Process

Use a collaborative planning process

The residential programs that successfully use a PYA found that it was essential to prepare all staff in advance. Approach the planning process collaboratively rather than a mandate. If there is to be a shift from traditional attitudes and beliefs, there has to be a significant up-front investment in a planning process through which leaders engage staff in conversations (over a period of time) in order to respond to their questions, concerns and suggestions.

Involve all staff

According to Drs. Ashcraft and Anthony (2008), once the top leaders in an organization get the vision and the youth have bought into the peer relationship, leadership needs to pay special attention to other staff members. Unless you get the doctors, nurses, counselors, therapists, case managers, teachers, direct care staff and all other staff at your residential program to understand and embrace recovery principles and practices the whole effort can be sabotaged.

Address staff concerns

Staff may fear that they will be replaced by PYAs or express concerns that the PYAs, who may be former residents, will now be colleagues with the same rights and privileges as any staff member. This concern may be more likely an issue in organizations that have not previously involved youth in any governance activities. While it can be difficult for staff to view youth as equals, it is important to the success of the PYA role.

Help staff understand that PYAs are not there to take things away from other professionals, but rather to enhance and expand what the program is able to offer to youth. Programs with existing family peer advocate staff may be able to use that experience as a bridge to understand the PYA role.

Explore the benefits of complementary roles

Help staff learn how peer advocates have added value to other programs. Ashcraft and Anthony (2007a) summarized some of the reported benefits of having peers join the staff:

“A key to the success is training staff on the role ... why you are hiring a PYA. Be sure to assess and acknowledge staff concerns and feelings. Don’t ignore this but rather face it head on. For example, most organizations have policies around not sharing personal information with the youth so it is critical that you create a culture where it is okay for the PYA to self-disclose within appropriate boundaries.”

Brian Lombrowski
Youth Involvement Specialist
New York State Office of Mental Health
New York City Field Office

- Peers (including family members) can reach out and engage people unwilling to use behavioral health services. This is especially important because only 15% of people with serious mental illnesses are estimated to receive minimally adequate treatment.
- Peers who work alongside professional staff provide living proof that recovery is possible. This can raise morale by providing evidence to service providers that people can and do recover.
- Peers provide a living example of hope for others with mental illnesses. The “if I can do it, you can do it” message doesn’t even have to be spoken- it’s right there before their eyes. This often allows peers to engage and bond with people who otherwise would be reluctant to trust and use clinical services.
- Peers can free up professional staff to do other tasks that can be done only by professionals because of licensing issues and regulations.
- The boundaries and ethics that guide most peer programs are very similar to those that guide professionals, but peers do have more latitude in being ‘real’ people. By this we mean that they can share their own experiences of recovery because they are operating on a foundation of mutuality. This is a great asset that can be incorporated into a clinical team to improve overall engagement and trust.
- Peers’ personal experiences can be a valuable asset to the clinical team. When they add their first-person knowledge and their stories of recovery to the service mix, services are enhanced and extended, as well as infused with hope and self-determination.

D. Embrace Change

The PYA is a new role for everyone at the agency, including the PYA. All programs and all staff (including the PYA) will go through a learning curve. Success requires flexibility, a willingness to make adjustments when there are challenges, and clearly articulated, steadfast commitment on the part of agency leaders and program supervisors. There are many aspects to this, but the following came up frequently in the interviews with providers and youth.

Acceptance of the Peer Youth Advocate as a Change Agent

The PYA is being hired, in part, to offer perspective and challenge ‘business as usual’ thinking. He or she is helping to elevate youth voice, and look for new opportunities to improve engagement and outcomes.

When interviewed for this paper, a number of youth gave examples of how PYAs challenged agencies review and update rules and policies that no longer make sense. In some cases people could not even remember why the policies were developed. Only when the PYA constantly

challenged the rules and policies, did program leadership agree to make changes.

In one example, peer advocates report that many residential programs have a rule that only English can be spoken in the public areas. PYAs in that program decided to challenge this rule and found that it was based on myths, unfounded suspicions, and prejudice. Staff didn't understand that by using a familiar language, the PYA was actually trying to help diffuse a situation or soothe an upset resident. Through consistent advocacy the PYAs were able to gain support for a policy change. The PYA led by example - with backing from program leaders. Training protocols, staff attitudes and practices eventually changed.

“With embedded positions [those in which a residential program hired a PYA to be on their staff] there was the chance that it would end being a double-edged sword - that the PYA, in order to be more like staff, can begin to identify with the “oppressor” and act in similar ways (such as enforcing consequences). Agencies need to keep an eye on this situation and teach staff to respect the PYA for their own unique role and to help the PYA understand they do not have to agree with staff to have the same value.”

Brian Lombrowski
Youth Involvement Specialist
New York State Office of Mental Health
New York City Field Office

A Strong Commitment to Cultural and Linguistic Competency – Including an Understanding of Youth Culture

As mentioned earlier youth-guided and culturally competence practice changes go hand-in-hand. Programs need to ensure that all consents, paperwork, resident rights, orientation brochures and all other written materials are translated into the languages (and reading levels) that are reflective of the community being served.

Staff training in cultural and linguistic competence will reduce misunderstandings and sensitize staff to cultural nuances. Unless the staff has this knowledge they might not fully understand certain behaviors (e.g. family-member interactions; ideas about mental health, how much information is shared). Family involvement can be extremely beneficial in integrating important values, beliefs, and priorities that the team would otherwise not know about.

When developing a care plan and in their work with youth, staff should be coached to draw upon the youth's preferences, beliefs and cultural traditions as a resource and an important aspect of their identity. The youth is much more likely to be engaged and invested in a plan that is individualized and rich with natural supports.

Agency leaders should make it a priority to hire PYAs who are reflective of the culture, ethnicity, and gender of the youth in the program. Programs need to develop other types of community relationships and partnership (e.g. mentors, faith community ties, neighborhood groups, multi-cultural organizations) as well to provide youth with a range of connections to the different aspects of their culture.

Youth interviewed for this handbook felt that the most important bonds were those borne of a similar ‘lived’ experience - someone who knows what they have been through and is truly a part of youth culture.

Youth expressed a similar openness to working with a PYA of either gender. However, programs that hired both male and female PYAs did notice a natural bond based on gender.

Making good on the promise to really listen to youth

Agency leaders have to be very clear about their commitment to youth-guided care. A program that has worked hard to adopt youth-guided care as a core value, and that has already worked on implementing a number of youth-guided practices, will be far more successful integrating the new PYA positions.

Success can only come if the organization is willing to not only listen to the youth voice, but to change the way of doing business based on youths’ input. The new ideas of youth can lead to better outcomes. For this to happen, though, it is incredibly important to prepare the entire organization to fully understand that the PYA’s role is to foster greater youth voice. That way, once the PYA begins to teach the youth to be their own self-advocates, staff members are more likely to be able to really listen.

Assessing current organizational practices

The BBI Self-Assessment Tool (SAT) is designed to gather information from program leadership, staff, families, youth and community partners to promote a discussion about how the organization and its community partners are performing along a number of dimensions. Engaging in a thorough self-assessment process could help any organization identify strengths and opportunities for growth in a number of areas including the extent to which practices are family-driven, youth guided and culturally competent.

See Appendix E an overview of the BBI Self-Assessment Tool. Full SAT and guidance can be found on the BBI website www.buildingbridges4youth.org.

D. Clarify the Role of the Peer Youth Advocate

Peers should ALWAYS be part of the residential program team, with a specific role that is regarded with the same value as that of any other team member. This role should enable the PYA to draw upon his/her unique skill set to engage and empower the youth to have a strong voice.

There are many roles that a PYA might be asked to perform and it is up to each organization to consider its own needs. What does the organization hope to achieve through this role? In developing a new PYA position, it may be helpful to seek guidance from organizations that have had success.

This following list of possible PYA roles was gleaned from interviews responses. The first three items were cited most frequently by respondents:

- Meeting with youth one to one
- Mentoring for youth
- Providing peer advocacy
- Actively participating in staff meetings, treatment team meetings, child and family team meetings, service plan reviews, etc.
- Participating in the intake process/interview
- Meeting with the youth as soon as possible after admission (if not before admission)
- Representing the agency in the community
- Planning youth activities, recreation and trips (for individuals and groups of youth)
- Facilitating a youth council or youth advisory group
- Conducting self-advocacy and leadership training for youth
- Facilitating peer-led community meetings
- Assisting in developing culturally sensitive programs and events for youth and their families
- Serving as a liaison between youth and other staff
- Participating in the hiring of staff and the ongoing review of staff performance.
- Representing youth on the agency leadership management team.
- Attending school (to further their education and life goals)
- Supporting successful transitions from the program back to the community (to home or independent living) or to another program
- Linking youth with community-based youth programs and serving as a liaison to those programs
- Helping youth learn how to use public transportation
- Escorting youth when they apply for benefits or state-issued IDs
- Running youth leadership groups

“Advocates come from an outsider’s perspective and that’s why the youth respond to them. Not once has treatment been effective if you reduce the peer advocate to a second class citizen on the team, a token... the advocate and the youth see through and know when they are tokens.”

Jeremy Kohomban
President and CEO
Children’s Village, NY

- Doing outreach and follow up with youth who are no longer in the residential program or any type of group or foster care
- Being a constructive agitator, encouraging the agency to honestly reflect on its practices and outcomes
- Participating in local, state or national youth run organizations, councils and/or events

Ashcraft and Anthony (2009) emphasize the importance of keeping the focus of the PYA work clear so that their value can be fully realized:

“Get to know the strengths of the individuals you hire as PYAs try to match their strengths with their interest; that’s how you’ll most effectively use the role and integrate the role into your agency.”

Caroline McGrath
Executive Director
UMass Adolescent Programs, MA

A few final cautionary notes about the use peers in the workforce: Their effectiveness can drop dramatically if they are relegated to fetching food boxes, straightening up waiting rooms, or doing junior case management work. Make sure your organization enables peer employees to contribute their unique gifts-personal engagement, mutuality of interests-so they can enhance the services provided to individuals by others on the team. Make peers equal contributors to the healing process. (p. 2)

What role can a Peer Youth Advocate can play in your organization?

You may wish to review the sample job descriptions in Appendix D. These include job descriptions from across the country for:

- Peer mentors
- Peer transition facilitators
- Statewide youth involvement coordinator, and
- Other titles for PYAs working in different settings.

See also the training outlines and other resources in Appendix F.

Appendices can be found on the BBI Website: www.buildingbridges4youth.org

E. Prepare Youth in the Program

A key element to success is to allow the PYA to build relationships and trust with youth in the program.

Explain to youth that the PYA has unique expertise and special skills in leadership and advocacy. There is greater creditability as a result of the PYA's 'lived'

experience. The level of trust will also be influenced by evidence that the PYA is respected and valued by other staff and trusted to raise issues of concern without negative repercussions.

"It is really nice having a peer mentor here as I feel like someone understands where I am coming from."

Youth, MA

Involve Youth in the Creation of the Peer Youth Advocate Position

- Solicit feedback from the youth and young adults in the organization's programs to find out how they would like to use the services of peers and what services would be helpful.
- Involve youth from the program in the planning for the new PYA position. Youth representatives should be trained to assist with hiring interviews as well.
- It is often helpful to bring in youth leaders from local, state-wide or national youth run organizations to introduce the concept of peer advocacy and assure that youth and program leaders have current, best-practice guidance as this position is developed.

For some programs, these activities will be a natural outgrowth of a pre-existing youth advisory council or similar group, but for other programs, this level and type of participation will be a new practice and more support will be needed.

It is good practice, even if an organization is not imminently hiring a PYA, to involve youth wherever and whenever possible in the planning of events, programs and other leadership opportunities throughout the agency.

Engage Youth to Work with the Peer Youth Advocate

- When a new PYA is hired, consider different ways to allow him or her to meet the youth in the program. It may be helpful to set up informal group gatherings where youth can mingle with PYAs to get acquainted.
- The PYA can spend time getting familiar with all the departments in your agency. This will give youth in these departments an opportunity to learn about advocacy and to get to know the PYA first-hand.
- PYAs should be among the first people that a youth meets when he or she comes to a residential program. Preferably, the youth will meet the PYA before they move in. PYAs who were interviewed

"They are the coolest people on campus, always real, and never sugar coated anything. We have long talks and they always understand what I'm going through."

M (age 17), CA

shared that the most important time to connect is during the intake process. Giving youth the opportunity to hear the PYA's recovery story, gives a sense of hope that this difficult time does not need to define their life. Having PYAs on staff sends the message that youth are valued.

Grow Leaders from Within the Organization

- Many programs find that their best candidates for the PYA position are youth who were formally in one of their programs. This is especially likely if the organization has structures in place through which youth can develop their leadership skills through participation in a youth council, a leadership training, or similar activity. These types of opportunities give natural leaders an opportunity to rise to the top.
- Provide youth with opportunities to interact with organization's leadership team. The PYAs can help prepare youth to participate in these conversations, understand how to dress and how to conduct themselves in a meeting.
- Invite alumni back to speak to youth and staff about their experiences. In addition to providing an opportunity for youth in the program to converse with others who have moved on, it may also help the agency identify potential PYAs.
- Seek out youth advocacy (local, state, national level) activities and encourage youth to attend. Support this by supplying transportation or transportation money and staff support.

"I was a little 14 year old boy when the advocate invited me to a meeting for California Youth Connection and helped me to advocate for my rights. I became a great leader at Casa Pacifica and became treasurer..... It really got me great in running leadership groups, advocating, and attending state meetings. I learned how to answer phones, email, copying and creating a resume..... The advocate is always there for my problems with staff and peers. They listen and figured plans out."

M (age 16), CA

"The advocate was the reason I stayed out of a lot of trouble...Having you guys there benefited me because you were the ones who helped out with getting a bike for transportation to work, helped me get a bank account, as well as an identification card. If it wasn't for that then I would not have a place for my money to be safe. The advocates are a really big help whether someone just needs one of you to talk to or whether someone needs to get there booties to actually taking a step forward to getting something done!"

M (age 17), CA

"Having somebody there to help us with college stuff and a role model to look up to, It helped to know that there is somebody I can look back to when in need."

Z (age 19), CA

Tools for Peer Youth Advocates to use in their work with youth

Although not the primary focus of this Guide, there are a few sample tools in Appendix E that PYAs can use in their work with youth. These include:

- BBI Youth Tip Sheet and recommendations for its dissemination
- Wellness Self-Management for Youth
- Information on recovery and consumer perspectives
- Youth Council Examples
- Many components of training for PYAs can be adapted for use with youth, especially those youth being trained in leadership roles.

Appendices can be found on the BBI Website: www.buildingbridges4youth.org

III. Hiring, Training, Supervising and Supporting Peer Youth Advocates

A. Hiring

Consistently during the interviews and throughout the literature, having ‘lived’ or a shared experience is considered the single most important criteria when hiring a peer (youth) advocate. Since PYAs are individuals that have firsthand experiences in living with challenges and overcoming them (e.g., emotional or behavioral challenges, aging out of foster care, substance abuse issues or juvenile justice) they are able to support and assist others who come to the program with the added wisdom of personal experience.

Characteristics of an Effective Peer Youth Advocate

Youth, PYAs and staff who were interviewed were asked what skills and personal characteristics were common to effective PYAs. They identified the following:

- **Must have ‘lived’ experience.** There is a preference by some that the PYA come from the same child serving system; however, all felt it was more important for the experience to have been relevant to the job. (Some felt that if the PYA was formerly served by the agency that there would be more credibility, others did not cite this as a criterion.)
- **Must be willing to be open and share own ‘lived’ experiences,** be comfortable speaking publically with individuals or in groups.
- **Is a natural and mature leader who accepts responsibility,** has good people skills and is a team player. Interviewees from some programs shared that the candidate needed to have a personality that others would be drawn to and the ability to build relationships.
- **Shows a passion** for the work and a genuine **empathy** and concern for others.
- **Is stable in his or her own recovery** process. Some suggested that the candidate be at least out of the program for at least one year.
- **Has previous work or volunteer experience** and demonstrated job readiness skills.
- **Has life goals and a vision** for themselves continuing on in their own education. Most felt that the candidate should be at least a high school graduate and attending higher education.
- **Is able to articulate well the issues of youth** and support other youth to have a voice.

- Must be **comfortable in challenging staff, top management, and community partners** in a respectful way. The candidate should be comfortable being the voice of youth, for example in pointing out rules or policies that no longer appear to make sense.
- The candidate should have **completed a formal advocacy training** program or event, provided by another source, preferably a peer organization.
- Programs should engage in a variety of strategies to successfully recruit and retain PYAs who are **representative of the diversity of youth** in the program. Interviewees, while clearly valuing this diversity, underscored that the common experience and youth-to-youth connection were the cultural connections that seemed most important.

Resources related to hiring of Peer Youth Advocates can be found in Appendix D.

- Job Descriptions from ten programs
- Hiring Tip Sheet from the Technical Assistance Partnership

Appendices can be found on the BBI Website: www.buildingbridges4youth.org

B. Orientation and Training

It is risky to assume just because someone has ‘lived’ experience he or she is ready to be a PYA. Being a successful PYA involves the right combination of experience, skills, training and temperament. There is a lot for new PYAs to learn – this can be a very demanding role for a young person.

Training Curriculum

Organizations can develop a curriculum, adapt existing curricula or contract for training. Drs. Ashcraft and Anthony (2007b) shared the following advice:

[Look for one that] best matches your needs; find one with a strong recovery focus that trains students in their unique role as peers, not as junior case managers or junior clinicians. The training materials should help them understand and articulate their own experience of recovery and prepare them to share it in ways that help others recover. Avoid less creative, highly clinical curriculum packages. They reflect the mistake that peers need to know how to do things professionals do, but not to do them. This can confuse peers and parent partners trying to understand their new roles.

Most agencies reported that the PYA went through the same orientation as other new staff but that PYAs also needed additional training specific to the PYA role. Agencies shared that PYAs, also attending core agency staff continuing education and in-service staff training and were encouraged to attend appropriate conferences and youth-run activities in the community.

Training for Peer Youth Advocate Competencies

PYA and other program staff who were interviewed highlighted the importance of training to help the PYAs develop skills and knowledge. The level of skill required varies with each of these areas. In some cases, the PYA will be trained in specific skills to perform their role (e.g. active listening or how to facilitate a youth council). In other areas, they will need training to be more aware of common issues and understand their role in bringing that issue to the attention of another member of the team (e.g. domestic violence or substance use). For example, it is not expected that the PYA be an expert in substance abuse treatment, just that they be knowledgeable about possible signs of substance use and prepared to respond appropriately if/when that is a concern with a youth.

Organizations can add any other training that they believe a PYA would benefit from, taking care to consider their role, level of experience, and program needs.

- Active Listening
- Building informal support networks with youth
- Motivational Interviewing and empowerment strategies
- De-escalation training to learn calming techniques (but they should not be involved in restraint)
- Learning about youth and peer-run organizations in the community, state-wide and nationally
- Understanding key community resources, services and how to partner with family and adult peer organizations

“Once the PYA has completed orientation and new employee training, agencies should plan an additional three week orientation (depending on the size of the organization), for the PYA to rotate through all the different departments of your organization.

This will have a two-fold purpose, it will help staff and youth throughout the organization get to know the PYA and hear about the role and it will help familiarize the PYA to the various components of the organization (not just treatment programs, business services, etc.).

This hands-on in-service training will be invaluable for building relationships with the youth and staff and for engaging the PYA into your program. It gives staff an opportunity to get to know the role in a non-threatening situation and to see the PYA as a professional.”

Melissa Flavin
Assistant Director of Residential Services
Casa Pacifica, CA

- Team planning processes (e.g. Wraparound, Family Group Decision Making) that are used in the community
- Advocacy (through a youth, peer or family run organization)
- Acceptable topics for discussion with youth residents along with topics they need to stay away from, (i.e., explicit which drugs you took; answering specific questions about your boyfriend)
- Facilitating or hosting youth councils or other groups
- Child abuse and neglect reporting requirements
- Handling the feeling of isolation that is often felt by PYAs in their role
- Speaking up to people in leadership positions in a respectful but assertive way
- Self-care and stress management
- Time management
- How to speak and act in various types of meetings/events
- How to dress appropriately for the situation
- Boundaries (How to maintain appropriate ‘distance’ – e.g.; not engaging in financial or sexual relationships)
- Substance use or abuse
- Mental health, emotional and behavioral challenges
- Evidence-based practices, particularly those used in the programs within the agency
- Self-harming behaviors
- Domestic violence
- Dual relationships (How to avoid or navigate having multiple relationships with the same person – e.g., being both a provider and a friend; being a colleague and a service recipient)
- Confidentiality
- Conflict resolution strategies
- Workplace expectations, office policies, and general professional conduct, especially if this is the youth’s first professional job.
- Handling some of the feelings that are likely to experience - such as how not to be overwhelmed by another youth’s story or experiences.

“Support Specialists (peer youth advocates) help the youth navigate the internal system of the residential program, as well as the external community system. This makes the work of treatment easier, and often more fun, for the youth and professionals alike.”

Robert Lieberman, CEO
Southern Oregon Adolescent Study and
Treatment Center (SOASTC), OR

Cultural Competence Training

To fully embrace youth-guided principles, cultural and linguistic competence training for PYA (and for all staff) must be incorporated into the core training. This should not just be a ‘cookie-cutter’ nod but an approach that allows all staff to take the time to understand and recognize

that for young people “knowledge of one’s culture can contribute to a feeling of pride and to the development of self-esteem and a belief of ‘I can also’”(Harvey, 2007, p. 26).

To best serve the youth in the residential programs, the PYA needs to be culturally competent, “meaning that they must demonstrate sensitivity and responsiveness to individual variation in gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, and other unique orientations and needs of each transition-age youth or young adult and his or her family” (Clark and Hart, 2009).

PYA training outlines and recommendations from several types of programs can be found in Appendix E, including:

- Helping Transition Age Youth and Peer Providers Identify and Achieve Their Core Gift Potential
- Casa Pacifica’s Youth Leadership Training Schedule
- Peer Advocate Training from the Institute for Community Living

There are also resources in Appendix E on youth advisory groups such as:

- The Youth Experience (NY)
- Cohannet Academy (MA)
- Casa Pacifica’s Unity Council (CA)

Appendices can be found on the BBI Website: www.buildingbridges4youth.org

C. Supervision and Support

For organizations unaccustomed to having youth employees, some new models of support, training and supervision may need to be explored. For most agencies this is a new role within an organization and it is a 'learn-as-we-go' situation so an investment needs to be made for working things out and encouraging communication. All interviewees agree that support needs to be given from many different people and perspectives.

Fostering Relationships with Agency Leaders

PYAs should have several meetings with the agency leaders so that they become comfortable speaking openly in their presence. This is especially true if the PYA was formerly served by the agency. PYAs should always have a dotted line relationship to the Executive Director or CEO. PYAs should be actively engaged by senior level staff to discuss their role and any issues or concerns.

Administrative, Clinical and Peer Supervision

Ashcraft and Anthony (2007b) found that there are some common concerns with respect to supervision of adult peer and family peer staff members. These apply to PYAs as well.

Just as existing staff members need good supervision, peers and parent partners need it too. Good is the operative word here. We aren't suggesting that you micromanage peers and parent partners, and we aren't suggesting you ignore them either. Good recovery-based supervision involves putting peers' and parent partners' talents to work and helping them develop in areas that need to be strengthened.

We often ask organizational managers about the way they are supervising peers, and many tell us that they aren't sure. Many organizations haven't conducted performance evaluations of peer employees. Yet peers and parent partners, just like all other staff members, need regular and clear feedback on their performance, as well as help in moving through challenges. *CITATION*

"The CEO should know the advocates by name; show a vested interest in their success... If you want young people to be agitators you need to protect them."

Jeremy Kohomban
President and CEO
Children's Village, NY

The programs interviewed for this handbook offered the following advice:

- Supervision should include not only administrative supervision but also some type of clinical supervision or consultation as the PYAs frequently receive or hear information that the youth have not shared with anyone else.
- Supervisors should support partnerships between the PYAs and other staff.

- A Family Peer Advocate or Parent Partner should not be the PYA's supervisor. At times, the family partner and the PYA might do a joint home visit, attend a service planning meeting together, work on the same team, or collaborate to help a youth and their family work through a particular issue. However, a supervisory role is not advisable as the roles need to be distinct.
- The PYA should receive some form of regular supervision or consultation from a senior peer advocate. Because some organizations have only been able to hire a single PYA position, it is sometimes necessary to contract with a community-based peer-run organization for supervision or to have that organization actually hire the PYA to work on-site in the residential program. (As noted earlier, it is recommended that agencies have at least two PYAs.)
- Encourage and provide funding to allow advocates to actively participate with other peer youth advocacy organizations, councils or trainings. In addition to this being a natural support system, a friendly environment to learn public speaking and how to work as a group on important topics it may also open up other career avenues for the advocate.

Supporting Peer Youth Advocates' Personal Development

PYAs are young people going through their own recovery and experiencing the usual young adult transition issues. Many will have little or no professional work experience. Frequently, the advocate is learning how to juggle work, school, social life and maybe even living on their own for the first time. Provider organizations are likely to be invested in helping these young people be successful and it is natural for the PYAs to turn to staff members for support even though they are now employees.

In addition, PYAs are working with issues that strike very close to home based on their own experiences. Many will need guidance and support as they navigate what may be emotionally charged situations.

The following comments highlight the range of responses leaders gave to questions about the role their organizations, as employers, should play in the lives of the PYAs.

- *"It is important for program leadership to build a supported environment and that there was still a responsibility to provide 'life-coaching' even about things in PYAs personal life. Often they will be experiencing something for the first time and frequently there are no other supportive adults in their life to turn to for guidance. There can be difficulty transitioning from client to staff and at Cohannet they want the peer mentors to come to senior staff not the staff on the floor with those issues."*

Bryan Lary, Program Director
Cohannet Academy, MA

“I realize under different circumstances it could be me... so I’m very vocal and get very concerned about other things. I feel strong emotional connections with the youth, so I volunteer to do extra things with them or for them.”

Mike Valentine, Youth Advocate
St Vincent’s Services, NY

- *“You need to provide a supportive environment, but the Peer Advocates should be held accountable and there should be an expectation that they can follow agency rules and standards. It’s important for the agency to keep boundaries and not get as involved with personal issues as it is easy to get sucked into the problem, but it is more productive and helpful to the young person’s own recovery if you assist them by referring them to natural supports and resources in the community.”*

David Kamnitzer, Senior Vice President
Institute for Community Living, NY

- *“Both the peer mentors had been clients in the past and we had to help them transition roles especially around relationships with staff. They wanted to still rely on staff for their own personal support. The program had to figure out who they could use and in which ways when they needed different levels of support or supervision.”*

Maria Tebeau, Program Director
North American Family Institute (NFI)
Chauncey Hall Academy, MA

- *“When planning for this position it’s important to understand that a 21 year old raised in a system is not the same as a 21 year old raised by their parents and build in the necessary supports.”*

Denis McCarville, CEO
Alaska Children’s Services, AK

D. Challenges and Opportunities - Notes from the Field

Interviewees were asked for a) any challenges and successful strategies or suggestions that that felt were important to share with programs just getting started and b) their perception of the impact of hiring a PYA. Their comments included the following - in addition to those used throughout the paper.

Addressing Challenges

Programs that have been successful have generally made a commitment to a larger process of organizational transformation – of which the hiring of a PYA is a natural outgrowth.

Interviewees stressed that leadership’s capacity to support staff through the change process is critical.

Sustained Leadership Commitment

“There are bound to be mistakes and false starts. You can’t be discouraged, but rather need to push through that and keep the goals in mind. Need to remain open and welcoming so that youth and staff don’t shut down. It is important for top leadership to be on board as role models or the program might have more of a struggle in reaching the ultimate goal.”

Maria Tebeau, Program Director
North American Family Institute (NFI)
Chauncey Hall Academy, MA

Embrace Organizational Culture Change

“It is important to help staff to understand why you are doing this[hiring a PYA], that the PYA is there to challenge the way the agency thinks, to question the CEO, when other staff won’t... they are there to change the staff and leadership culture to ensure we do things differently.”

Robert Lieberman, CEO
Southern Oregon Adolescent Study
and Treatment Center (SOASTC), OR

Prepare and Support Staff

“Prior to actually hiring PYAs you need to have dialogues to talk about the new role with staff and youth, don’t just spring the role on them. Top management needs to show their support and smooth the way... help build those relationships. Assign the staff some reading.....”

Steve Elson, CEO
Casa Pacifica, CA

“When we were first introducing the youth advocate position it was a hard balance ... for the front-line staff to be on the same page. Line staff felt that youth would see the PYA as the ‘Good Cop’ versus the line staff as the ‘Bad Cop’.....We had to teach them how different roles were not in competition, that the direct care staff did different things.”

Melissa Flavin
Assistant Director of Residential Services
Casa Pacifica, CA

Create a Viable Position

“Leadership has to decide the value/vision because unless you pay and elevate the position, the staff won’t accept it.”

Caroline McGrath, Executive Director
UMass Adolescent Programs, MA

The Impact of Having a Peer Youth Advocate on Staff

Throughout this handbook there are examples of the ways in which having a PYA on the staff can help an organization. Those who have taken this step, underscore the profound positive impact of this decision on the culture of the organization and its stance toward the youth they serve.

A Different Connection With Youth

“Probably the biggest success has been our [PYAs] being able to intervene with ‘suicidal’ youth since a large part of our role is following up with youth once they have left the program. There is the ability to connect with the advocates. Another success at Casa Pacifica has been that we have been able to change the culture and the staff attitudes in the way they provide services.”

Raquel Montes, Senior Youth Advocate
Casa Pacifica, CA

Challenging Staff to Think Differently

“Youth advocates have helped staff be more focused, mindful, and listen to youth. They are challenging staff to question why we still have an outdated rule, they’ve changed the quality of the program, challenged the staff to think differently and do better for the youth.”

Steve Elson, CEO
Casa Pacifica, CA

Belief in the Capacity of Youth

“Our culture has shifted, we were very rigid/militaristic program and since adding the peer mentors we have become increasingly flexible and open... we learned mental health clients have a lot to contribute.”

Maria Tebeau, Program Director
North American Family Institute (NFI)
Chauncey Hall Academy, MA

Working in Partnership

“Initially staff couldn’t believe that PYAs were given keys, that they came to treatment plan meetings or they were getting paid as much as staff, but once they were on board and the staff saw that they had a different role and that they could help them...the culture changed... now units that don’t have a peer mentor are begging to have one. They have begun to work together rather than in isolation included them into the team.”

Caroline McGrath, Executive Director
UMass Adolescent Programs, MA

Take the Next Step!

The story that emerged from these interviews is this: successfully integrating and supporting a PYA as a part of your organization's team requires visionary leadership; sustained and careful attention to the change process; flexibility; and, above all, a belief in the importance of developing an organizational culture that is deeply respectful and responsive to each youth as an individual and to the collective youth voice.

The contributors to this handbook wholeheartedly endorse the hiring of PYAs – clearly articulating the benefits to the program and staff; the PYAs themselves; and, most importantly, the youth receiving services. This handbook captures just a small bit of the wisdom and advice these leaders have. They have shared many relevant documents (see the Appendices on-line at www.buildingbridges4youth.org) and they have all expressed an interest in working collaboratively with others to promote broader adoption of youth-guided practices and the hiring of PYAs.

We hope that this handbook will help your organization develop a concrete work plan to move forward in your efforts to successfully engage PYAs as members of your team – and to review your organization's culture and practices to ensure that they respect youths' individuality, culture, and right to have a meaningful voice in the decisions that affect them.

National Building Bridges Initiative: Learn More and Get Involved!

To find out more about BBI and how you can get involved please visit the BBI website:

<http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org>

Or contact:

Gary Blau: 240-276-1980

gary.blau@samhsa.hhs.gov

Beth Caldwell: 413-644-9319

bethcaldwell@roadrunner.com

Other Tip Sheets and White Papers available on the BBI Website:

- *Your Life-Your Future , A Tip Sheet for Youth* (English and Spanish)
- *Youth Life – Youth Future, A Tip Sheet for Youth: Recommendations for Dissemination*
- *A Tip Sheet for Families Considering a Residential Program* (English and Spanish)
- *The BBI Self- Assessment Tool* and related documents
- *Cultural and Linguistic Competence Guidelines for Residential Programs*
- *Fiscal Strategies that Support the Building Bridges Initiative Principles*
- *The Building Bridges Initiative and Child Welfare: A Collaborative Path to Achieve Permanency.*

New tools and resources are being added to the website regularly. Check back often!

Send us information and resources that you find helpful!

IV. References

- American Association of Children's Residential Centers (AACRC), Community Alliance for the Ethical Treatment of Youth (CAFETY) and Youth Motivating Others through Voices of Experience (YouthMOVE) (2010). Redefining residential: Youth guided treatment. *The American Association of Children's Residential Centers, Redefining Residential Series, 7*.
- Ashcraft, L., & Anthony, W.A. (2009). Tools for transformation: Relationships-based recovery revisited, *Behavioral Healthcare*.
- Ashcraft, L., Anthony, W.A., & Bloss, M. (2008). Tools for transformation: Taking on the formidable middle. *Behavioral Healthcare*.
- Ashcraft, L., & Anthony, W.A. (2007a). Tools for transformation: The value of peer employees. *Behavioral Healthcare*.
- Ashcraft, L., & Anthony, W.A. (2007b). Tools for transformation: Adding peers to the workforce - What to keep in mind when you train peer employees and your existing staff, *Behavioral Healthcare*.
- Buffington, K., Gerrity, E., & Folcarelli, C. (2008). Supporting high-quality mental health services for child trauma: Family, youth and consumer involvement. *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Policy Brief, 1-7*.
- Butman, M. (2009). Peer mentoring: Real recovery for young adults, *Focal Point: Research, Policy and Practice in Children's Mental Health 23 (2)*, 28-31.
- Clark, H.B., & Hart, K. (2009). Navigating the obstacle course: An evidence-supported community transition system. . In H. B. Clark, & D. K. Unruh (Editors), *Transition of youth and young adults with emotional or behavioral difficulties: An evidence –supported handbook, 2*, 60. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Friesen, B.J. (2005). The concept of recovery: "Value added" for the children's mental health field? *Focal Point: Research, Policy and Practice in Children's Mental Health 19, 1*, 5-8.
- Galasso, L.B., Arrell, A., Webb, P., Landsman, S., Holmes, D., Frick, K., Bradford Knowles, L., Fair-Judson, C., Smith, R., & Clark, H.B. (2009). More than friends – Peer supports for youth and young adults to promote discovery and recovery. In H. B. Clark, & D. K. Unruh (Editors), *Transition of Youth & Young Adults with Emotional or Behavioral Difficulties, An Evidence –Supported Handbook, 7*, 230. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Harvey, A. (2007). 'This is My Home': A culturally competent model program for African-American children in the foster care system. *Focal Point: Research, Policy and Practice in Children's*

Mental Health 21 (2), 25-27.

Lombrowski, B. (2009). *Youth advocacy 101: Everything you ever wanted to know about (but were afraid to ask). What it means to be a youth advocate.* New York: New York State Office of Mental Health, New York City Field Office.

Matarese, M., McGinnis, L., & Mora, M. (2005). *Youth involvement in systems of care: A guide to empowerment -reflections from the field.* Washington, DC: Technical Assistance Partnership.

Mead, S. & MacNeil, C. (2006). Peer support: What makes it unique? *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 10 (2), 29-37.

Sieler, D., Orso, S., & Unruh, D.K. (2009). Partnerships for youth transition: Creating options for youth and their families. In H. B. Clark, & D. K. Unruh (Editors), *Transition of youth and young adults with emotional or behavioral difficulties: An evidence –supported handbook*, 3, Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.