

5 | RECRUITING, HIRING & TRAINING SUCCESSFUL YOUNG ADULT PEERS

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RECRUITING AND HIRING

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1. Define “Peer” in your provider context

Consider the youth and young adult clients that you serve or desire to serve. Ask yourself, **who are your YA clients’ peers?** What kinds of characteristics, expertise and/or life experiences should they have and not have? What peer characteristics, expertise and/or life experiences would fit well with your agency/context? What characteristics, expertise and/or life experiences are missing or needed among your peer and non- peer staff?

Here are some examples of characteristics & experiences peers and clients might have in common:

- Near in age
- Mental health concerns, diagnoses, and/or substance use challenges
- Vocational experiences and/or goals, such as having been assigned an Individual Education Plan (IEP), delayed high school completion, struggles with post-secondary education, and difficulty securing and/or retaining employment
- Interests, hobbies, and career paths
- Treatment experiences, including residential care, psychotropic prescription medication (including injectables), psychiatric hospitalization, and/or outpatient care
- Adverse childhood experiences, including instability at home, isolation, bullying, trauma exposure/abuse, and/or grief and loss
- System involvement – child welfare, juvenile/criminal justice, special education
- Demographic characteristics: race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, & community affiliation
- Treatment

2. Describe key functions of the YA peer position

There are, of course, functions essential to any YA peer position (chapter 1). In addition,

the peer job may have a focus on specific client populations that will impact the necessary functions, and thus job qualifications and recruiting. These areas of focus have included (but are not limited to) forensic involvement, dual disorders, employment, housing, care navigation, and community re-entry.

3. Establish job qualifications

The primary job qualifications for the YA peer job should relate to applicants’:

- Lived experience;
- Capacity to engage in peer support with clients;
- Capacity to advocate with and for clients;
- Professional and ethical conduct.

Job qualifications may also relate to the completion of specific trainings and the attainment of peer specialist certification, as discussed below.

Of note, many providers have found that the application of common job criteria for care positions can *effectively* screen some of the most promising YA peer job candidates. Job direct criteria that most frequently screen out young adults with SMHC are educational attainment and criminal history. Many of these candidates are optimal for a given position because they have overcome high barriers toward their recovery and can best relate to clients facing similar struggles (e.g., forensic peer specialist). Thus, it makes sense for program management and HR to:

- Relax direct service requirements that tend to screen out TAY applicants (e.g., criminal history, education). This includes the minimization of exclusionary criteria that could be better addressed on a case-by-case basis.
- Establish new criteria in place of the limiting requirements by determining:
 - The degree to which criteria impacts job performance;
 - The criterion's relevance in relation to other peer job qualifications, such as lived experience;
 - The extent to which the applicant has overcome barriers.

Educational requirements typically applied to direct care workers often exclude capable YA peer applicants from job consideration. It is not uncommon for agencies to require that employees have at least a high school diploma or college degree before they will even be considered. Many YA peer applicants have not yet attained these degrees but do have essential experience in overcoming educational challenges that is reflective of current clients’ needs:

- Their lived experience of facing serious educational difficulties and achieving a state of wellness in spite of those difficulties;
- Their continuing efforts to advance their education while managing their mental health condition;
- The hard lessons they have drawn from these experiences.

Thus, providers should assess the degree to which their educational requirements are excluding good candidates, keeping in mind the relevance of peer training classes and certification.

Providers typically conduct a criminal background check for direct care job applicants in order to evaluate, or screen out, applicants with convictions for various offenses. Such practices create employment barriers that disproportionately affect members of disadvantaged groups, including the many TAY who have had contact with the criminal justice system for arrests and/or convictions for minor offenses. However, peer applicants with criminal histories are often the most empathetic and experienced when talking to another peer facing serious struggles and impediments, especially those within forensic or diversionary settings.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) now discourages the use of employment exclusionary criteria based on criminal justice involvement in favor of a more individualized review of each candidate (see the [2012 U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC\) guidance](#)). Based on the EEOC guidance, several best practices have emerged to guide employers in offering people with a criminal background a fair chance for employment (see [Best Practices and Model Policies: Creating a Fair Chance Policy](#), of the National Employment Law Project).

Best practices on criminal history when hiring TAY job applicants:

- Criminal history as a hiring factor
 - Avoid exclusions related to criminal history, except when legally mandated;
 - An applicant's criminal record should be factored into hiring decisions only when directly related to job duties and responsibilities, and then in light of the gravity of the crime and the length of time since the offense;
 - If there is a concern about a criminal conviction, provide the applicant with the right, and sufficient time, to submit evidence of mitigation or rehabilitation. (Background check reports can be inaccurate.)
- Job applications and notices
 - The inclusion of a check off "box" or any other query about all or some criminal convictions often discourages people with any criminal history from applying. **Thus, do not ask about criminal history on job applications** (there will be chances to ask relevant questions during the interview process). (Of note, as of April 2017, over 100 counties and cities as well as 25 states have adopted "Ban the Box" policies in their Fair Employment laws and regulations.)
 - Do not include a provision to permit "voluntary disclosure" of background check information from the applicant.
 - Generally avoid phrases such as "must pass a background check," or "clean background only" as this language may be interpreted as a categorical exclusion.
 - If a background check is necessary or if there is a specific legal barrier, state that on the application.
- Expungement

Some very qualified candidates may have a record of relatively minor criminal convictions that by state laws/ regulations or agency policies exclude them from employment. Often YA job applicants have limited knowledge of what is in their record and may be upset or surprised to learn the types and number of charges.

We advise companies to help qualified candidates to attempt to clear (expunge) their record through an appeal process or waiver available in many states (see [50 state guide to judicial relief](#)). Companies can directly support the job applicant in this expungement process and/or refer the candidate to [other available assistance](#).

4. **Written Job Description for the Peer Provider role**

Develop the YA peer provider job description (and complete the three previous steps) BEFORE hiring takes place – even if you have found the perfect young adult to be your new “peer provider.” There will be opportunities to alter the description as more is learned about how to effectively implement the role; however, a job description is a necessary starting point in providing staff and potential peer applicants with basic planning information for:

- Potential peer applicants – to determine if it’s a job they really want and then what supports they will need in place;
- Management - to plan for implementation and support the role;
- Existing staff - to better understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to those of the peer;
- Peers when hired - for job clarity and direction.

Have your HR department, administration, and staff who will be working with YA peers involved in shaping the role and determining key desirable characteristics. By being part of this process, non- peer staff will learn about the role and feel a sense of commitment having been a part of creating it – thus decreasing potential conflict about the role down the road. For a sample job description, see Appendix C.

5. **Young Adult Peer Job Classification and Pay**

Job classification systems aim to define and evaluate responsibilities, functions, and authority levels of each job. These systems place job types in a class based on functions and requirements, and each class often has a series of grades, which include compensation ranges, other benefits, and promotion opportunities.

We find that most provider agencies, when first considering hiring peers, do not have job classification systems that include the peer job title or something analogous in terms of responsibilities and skills. This may delay hiring or result in peers being placed into job classes that under-represent the level of responsibility they take on, with negative impacts on salary and benefits. Thus, program leadership should bring in HR well before hiring to review the YA peer description and to link the job to the appropriate job classification.

We do believe that because the peer job has its own unique features, skill sets, and qualifications, it makes sense to have a single class focused on this growing professional role. The challenge is that job classification systems have often been negotiated among multiple parties, including HR, clinical leadership, and sometimes unions. Under these circumstances, job titles and descriptions can be difficult to alter or re-create. But when program leadership, in advance of hiring peers, discuss with other company departments and union leadership about the need for a “peer” job classification, the potential for creating that classification is greatly enhanced. In fact, union contracts often allow for the creation of new job types, but time for education and negotiation is needed. **As with any other profession, compensation should reflect the skills required for the particular peer role, as a matter of fairness and in order to attract high quality candidates.**

6. Find and Attract Successful Young Adult Peer Provider Candidates

For effective YA peer recruitment, you must establish connections with networks that YA peers are associated with, including: youth and young adult peer and advocacy groups, vocational training programs for older youth/young adults with disabilities, treatment programs, and local post-secondary education programs, including certificate programs, associates, and bachelors programs. It is especially important to distribute job notices on social media and blogs that potential candidates follow. The job notice document must have language that is youth/young adult appropriate and be in a format that can be forwarded via email.

7. Interviewing Young Adult Peer Candidates

Basic interview guidelines to follow are:^{lxvi}

- Review the job description with the YA peer candidate;
- Advise the YA peer candidate that he or she must be able to talk about their recovery;
- Make clear that it is essential that the candidate be able to serve as a role model of recovery;
- Ask about prior work history.

According to the [EEOC](#), employers are prohibited from using qualification standards, employment tests, and other selection criteria that screen out or tend to screen out individuals with disabilities, *unless the criteria relates to a necessary qualification or job function*. Since the peer role generally requires that the job-holder have the lived experience of a mental health condition and/or have used mental health services, inquiries about these topics in relation to job functions is permissible (See [2007 bulletin of the EEOC](#)). CASRA, in their guide [Meaningful Roles for Peer Providers in Integrated Healthcare](#) provides examples of valid interview questions (page 115):

1. *“Please tell us about what recovery means to you and how your own experience informs your knowledge and beliefs?”*
2. *“One of the essential job functions of this position is being able to share the story of your recovery from behavioral health challenges for the benefit of consumers/family members receiving services. Can you give us an example of using your story to benefit a client or family member who is struggling with an issue?”*
3. *“What do you feel is the most important aspect of peer-provided services?”*

Specific questions not tied to essential job functions—about diagnoses, medication use, and experience of treatments—are generally not permissible. However, questions about how a YA peer would maintain healthy relational boundaries on the job are valid to explore. See the EEOC’s helpful resource: Pre-Offer, Disability-Related Questions: Dos and Don’ts (<https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/adahandbook.cfm#dodonts>) for additional guidance.

An applicant may ask for a reasonable accommodation to help them apply for the job (such as having a job advisor present at the interview with them). An excellent resource for providing accommodations during the job application process is at the Job Accommodation Network- [Employers’ Practical Guide to Reasonable Accommodation Under the Americans](#)

[with Disabilities Act](#), page 7. And as noted above, ask criminal record related questions only when it is directly tied to the qualifications and requirements necessary for the job. The most effective policy is to delay all such inquiries until after a conditional offer of employment is made.

8. **Other Things to Consider in the Process of Identifying, Recruiting, & Interviewing Young Adult Peer Provider Candidates**

For young adults specifically, it is very important to assess not only their commitment to the role, but their availability to do the job, as many young people are juggling work, school, and other commitments. It is also important to assess the extent to which the young adult is truly a peer of your provider's clientele. In regards to considering what kind of training and support will be necessary for YA peer candidates, consider how professional the candidate acts as well as the extent to which they can work autonomously. The questions listed below will help your organization to identify ideal YA peer provider candidates.

Commitment to YA Peer Role & Availability

- Why is the candidate interested in being a peer provider? How motivated is the candidate to secure this position and share their lived experience to motivate their peers?
- How long is the candidate likely to serve in this role? (At least a year commitment is desirable given that changing jobs/moving is common during this period of development).
- What kinds of hours can the candidate dedicate to being a YA peer? (Especially, what is the candidate's availability during the day, evenings, and weekends? Can the candidate make the weekly team meeting?)
- Is the candidate employed elsewhere or going to school? Will the candidate continue with these commitments? Are there any other current responsibilities that the candidate has that will likely be inspirational/motivational to current clients (such as caretaking, volunteering)?
- What ideas do they have for activities to engage youth and young adult clients? How Creative are they? How comfortable are they doing outreach? Are they willing to meet with clients both in the community and on-site at the agency?

Peer Characteristics & Attributes

- What shared "peer" characteristics, other than having mental health challenges and experience with treatment, does the candidate share with the agency's younger clientele?
- How well will YA clients be able to relate to the candidate? Conversely, how well do you think the candidate will be able to relate to the agency's younger clientele?
- What is the candidate's story? How will the candidate share their story with younger clientele? Have they shared their story before?
- Is the candidate able to convey hope? What are their personal life goals? Do they see this position as a stepping-stone to their long-term career goals?

Professionalism & Capacity for Autonomy

- How confident does the candidate appear? Will the candidate remain resilient on the job? How does the candidate handle stressful situations?
- How much supervision, training, and/or support will the candidate need in the YA peer role?
- Is the candidate an effective communicator, and of note, what kind of support would help him/her get there? Different types of communication include email, text, and face-to-face.

Does the candidate communicate well with peers & supervisors/senior staff? Do they have experience in documentation/clinical note writing? (Have the candidate engage in a writing activity during the interview process.)

- What concerns does the candidate have about their competency to perform the duties that are part of the YA peer role?

TRAINING YOUNG ADULT PEERS

Basic understanding of your workplace. In relation to older peers, young adult peers are more likely to need assistance learning about workplace norms and expectations. An array of trainings that would be important to the success of many YA peers includes:

- Essential workplace skills;
- Personnel policies and benefits;
- Workplace rights and responsibilities;
- Building resilience through stress management, self-care, and wellness planning.^{lxvii}

There are many free resources online that supervisors and training staff can build on in order to tailor trainings to meet the specific needs of YA peers in your context.

Reinforce Required Staff Trainings. YA peers should participate in all agency required orientation trainings, which should include an introduction to the following: agency procedures (e.g., benefits), company culture and philosophy, and how to use agency resources. In order to begin a dialogue about agency policies and practices that is transparent from the start, the YA peer's supervisor should revisit these topics after the initial orientation meeting. Group supervision is an excellent forum for inviting human resources and benefits staff on a quarterly basis to provide information, and reinforce discussions about benefits, policies, and work-related information – all of which YA peers can gain competency in so that they can coach their youth and young adult clients to inquire about these topics when they gain employment.

Additional training topics that build YA peer job skills:

- Motivational Interviewing & Active Listening
- Professionalism
- Healthy Boundaries
- Strategic Sharing
- Suicidality assessment & safety planning
- Communication and leadership styles

Access to YA Peer-specific Trainings. There are a growing number of training opportunities available for YA peers to develop skills and competencies. Most states offer the Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) training, which educates attendees on the basics of being a peer provider, with a focus on the profession's ethical standards and specific approaches to engaging clients in the recovery process.^{lxviii} States and providers often favor certification because, in some cases, it allows the provider to bill Medicaid for services while ensuring that the YA peer has an understanding or

their job responsibilities. The CPS training is intensive (typically 80 hours in length) and requires the passing of an exam in order to become “certified” as a peer specialist.^{lxix} We recommend that young adult peers take this training, or a version of this training, that addresses specific young adult issues. Other valuable trainings for YA peers include [Wellness Recovery Action Planning](#)[®] (WRAP)[®] and [Whole Health Action Management \(WHAM\)](#) trainings. Both will provide the YA peer provider with concrete tools to engage and partner with young adult clients around their health management goals. Peer run trainings for the WRAP and the WHAM are hosted in many states and counties. With government support they tend to be low in cost or free and are between 1 to 3 days in length.

YA peers report that the best trainings teach peers:^{lxx}

1. That the client is the expert on his/her own care;
2. Strategies for helping people diagnosed with SMHC to take control of their lives;
3. To not depend on any one, specific engagement approach (e.g., “to meet clients where they are”).

Organizations should leverage their relationships with other organizations, and state and national entities, in order to establish ongoing trainings, workshops, and conference opportunities for YA peer providers to interact with other YA peer providers. This serves two functions: 1) to develop skills that are beneficial in their work as YA peers and 2) to develop a natural support network of YA peer providers. By connecting with others who are trying to engage a similar population and are facing similar challenges in their role, YA peer providers experience a strong sense of validation through collective mentoring, natural social support connections, and learning directly from their peers.

TEACH PRINCIPLES OF STRATEGIC STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a form of art that appeals to our emotions. Strategic sharing is an approach to sharing one’s life experiences in order to influence and instigate change. While storytelling comes more naturally to some, it is a skill that can be developed over time among YA peer providers, and it is necessary to effectively engage and impact their clients. Strategic storytelling itself is a reflective process where young people: 1) learn how to develop motivating stories; 2) engage in sharing personal experiences with key people at key times; and 3) process these sharing experiences in supervision in order to maintain on-the-job resiliency and hone strategic storytelling skills.

Key Elements for Effective YA Peer Provider Strategic Storytelling

- YA peers must develop confidence and competency in strategic sharing, as it is a key part of their job. It is the provider’s responsibility to ensure that YA peer providers are prepared and supported in this crucial part of their role. Providing regular training workshops on, and supervision around, storytelling is important. Storytelling workshops should ideally include peer and non-peer staff, especially peer provider supervisors.
- Stories must be understood as dynamic, not static. Stories change as we develop and create

new meaning of life experiences. An especially important notion to embrace is that a story that is emotionally triggering today might not be so tomorrow, and vice versa.

- In order to be effective, storytelling workshops should be augmented with training in active listening and motivational interviewing. It is especially important for YA peer providers to learn the power of non-judgmental, open-ended responses when engaging youth and young adult clients. YA peer providers should learn clear ways to express empathy and genuine concern for their clients.
- Supervisors and YA peer providers should recognize the risks associated with strategic storytelling for young adult peer providers and ensure that they have sufficient on-the-job support. Sharing one's life experiences, even the positive ones, may produce unintended information and feelings in YA peers as well as unintended reactions from clients.
- Those who train and/or supervise YA peers must apply a strengths-based approach in supporting them in reframing their personal life struggles into stories of overcoming hardship that will inspire their clients. This process is akin to narrative therapy, where various aspects of a story are explored and reframed to empower individuals and families.
- As YA peer providers participate in initial trainings, they learn to use their experiences to engage youth and young adult clients.

Two fantastic resources for understanding the basics of strategic storytelling are:

1. The Pathways Research & Training Center Strategic Sharing Workbook: Youth Voice in Advocacy. This tool is designed to increase competency of peer provider supervisors in their efforts to support YA peers in developing their peer provider worker identity. Accessible at: <http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbStrategicSharingGuide.pdf>.
2. The Hunter School of Social Work Strategic Sharing, which teaches young adult peers to consider what elements of the story to share to certain audiences as well as the importance of personally claiming the meaning of the story being shared. Clients will make sense of peer provider stories in various ways – and it is very important that the young adult peer provider claim their emotions and perspectives of their personal stories. Accessible at: http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/StrategicSharing.pdf.

REVIEW AND DISCUSS PEER PROVIDER DISCLOSURE POLICIES

Disclosing personal information is at the heart of the YA peer provider role, but has particular implications for young adults. Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), online video sharing websites (e.g., YouTube, VineVideos, Vimeo) and agency websites that integrate YA peer photos, videos, and stories are methods that are likely to engage youth and young adult clients. Your organization must work with young adult peer providers individually to establish the extent to which the young adult peer provider wants their personal identity (e.g., name, photo) shared on organization websites and social media outlets. This is beyond seeking YA peer consent; it is ensuring that a young adult peer understands that what goes on to the internet may never truly be removed.

Over time, YA peers may change their perception of having their name and photo (or video)

associated with a particular organization or cause. The supervisor must continue to discuss organizational use of young adult peer provider personal stories for marketing or advocacy purposes with both YA peer providers and organizational administration. Best-practices for online information sharing for YA peer providers includes having photos, quotes, and videos on the internet for a fixed amount of time to allow multiple YA peer providers the opportunity to be in the spotlight, but also limit the time that a YA peer provider's name, image, and story are available online.