

Wraparound Practice: Chapter 4c.2

Youth Advocates: What They Do and Why Your Wraparound Program Should Hire One

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Our perspectives on youth advocacy have been shaped by our personal experiences as recipients of mental health and child welfare services, as well as our experiences as a Care Coordinator and as Youth Advocates within New York City's system of care. We know first-hand how hard it is for youth to feel supported and heard as they make their way through the educational and service systems. We have also seen what a difference youth advocates can make in engaging youth and empowering them to be full partners in their own care. As an integral part of a wraparound team, youth advocates keep it real for their team members and serve as a continuous reminder of the importance of staying strength based and youth guided. For the youth who participate in wraparound, the presence of youth advocates provides concrete evidence that their care teams just might really mean what we say—that the youth's voice matters.

Potential Roles of the Youth Advocate Within the System of Care

Engagement. Too often a youth's strengths, voice and preferences remain unrecognized and unheard by their service providers. The past disappointments that youth have experienced with service providers, peers and family members can also leave youth feeling mistrustful, without hope and reluctant to engage in relationship-building with people on their care team. The opportunity to speak with another youth who has undergone similar experiences and who is a part of their wraparound team is often the first step in building trust and reducing the isolation that is typical for youth

who struggle with mental health challenges.

Support. Perhaps the most important role for the youth advocate is providing peer support to the youth whom they work with. For a youth, just knowing that there is somebody there for them who understands, and who has got their back, can be the basis for creating a new sense of hope and possibility.

Voice. Through the time that the youth advocate spends with the youth there is an opportunity to learn the youth's strengths, interests, and needs from the youth's perspective, and to coach and support the youth to voice their concerns and wants with their service providers and families.

When youth have difficulty in making their voices heard or wishes known in meetings, youth advocates can, by agreement with the youth, advocate on the youth's behalf.

Mentor. Like a traditional Big Brother or Big Sister, the youth advocate is a role model for the youth that they work with. Youth advocates are able to share their experiences about what has helped and hurt them in their process of recovery, and to offer suggestions about alternative ways of handling situations that may

arise with peers, parents, providers and others within the community. Youth advocates also have the flexibility to meet youth where they feel comfortable, and to participate in activities ranging from meeting for lunch or going shopping to meeting at family court or at the youth's school.

Bridge/Culture Broker. The gulf between the youth and service providers can be large, both culturally and in terms of control. The youth ad-

vocate can act as a bridge between the two. Ideally, the youth advocate will be fluent in both the language of the youth culture as well as the language of the provider culture, and prevent the breakdown of communication between the two. This role is particularly important in settings such as hospitals and residential treatment facilities where the power differential between youth and adults is greatest. A young person who is trusted by both youth and adults in such a setting can help to ameliorate the effects of the power differential.

Group Facilitator. Youth advocates can also play an important role in building and maintaining opportunities for youth to meet and socialize in a non-stigmatizing environment. In New York City, youth advocates facilitate several peer support, skill building and socialization groups for youth involved in the system of care.

Systems Transformation. Youth advocacy positions provide important opportunities for youth leadership development, creating a pool of well-informed youth who can provide a youth perspective on governance boards and planning and advisory bodies. In New York City, youth advocates also serve as part of the training team that delivers training on system of care principles and values and the family network (wraparound) process. Youth advocates are also called upon to provide presentations on issues of concern to youth, families and providers such as gang involvement and youth engagement. Making a place for youth at all of these tables and involving youth at all levels of decision making is an important part of realizing our effort to create a youth guided system of care.

Who Are Youth Advocates?

Youth advocates are generally young adults from the ages of 18-25 who have had personal experience within child- and family-serving systems (mental health, special education, child welfare, juvenile justice), and who are interested in ensuring that their peers receive high quality services that are responsive to their needs. More often than not, youth advocates are motivated by their desire to create more positive experiences for youth within the system of care than the ones that

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they had. The opportunity to make a difference to other youth facing emotional and behavioral challenges can also make a positive difference in the youth advocate's own recovery.

What to Look for When Hiring a Youth Advocate

In addition to the credibility that youth advocates have by virtue of their age and experience within the system of care, successful youth advocates are far enough along in their own recovery process that they can handle the stress of the job and serve as a positive role model for the youth they work with.

The ideal candidate will be young yet mature, and will have had experience within the child- and family-serving systems. Although as an organization we have employed youth advocates as young as 16, older youth more typically have the maturity it takes to balance the demands of the job with their personal life and self-care.



Past experience working with children (working for the YMCA, as a camp counselor, etc.) or an interest in working in the helping professions can be a plus. However, for many youth advocates, it is important to remember that this may be their first job. Far more important than work experience or educational credentials is a willingness to learn, the ability to relate well to other youth from diverse backgrounds, the capacity to follow through and a willingness to share their own experiences with child- and family-serving systems. Stigma is a factor that may influence a candidate's willingness to speak openly about his or her men-

tal health challenges in an interview situation. Remember, this is a process and the youth doesn't really know how safe disclosure is. The presence of other youth advocates in the interview or a separate meeting with another youth advocate can create a safer environment in which to assess whether the youth will be comfortable enough acknowledging their own challenges to other youth when appropriate.

How to Find the Ideal Candidate

Using the same search practices as you would to find a qualified social worker is likely to yield few applicants. Personal referrals have led to some of our most productive hires. Another strategy is to meet the young people where the young people are. Find community organizations within systems of care where youth are likely to be, and post flyers in those locations. Use the Internet. Go onto Myspace and post job announcements in public forums that are mental health related. Contact organizations of independent self-described youth advocates like the National Youth Rights Association (NYRA), Youth Advocates for Community-Based Treatment (Youth ACT), the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) or local chapters of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health. Individuals who, with no profit to themselves, have already decided to organize to fight for youth rights are likely to be good candidates for the job.

Training and Supervision of Youth Advocates

Experience as a recipient of services from mental health, special education, juvenile justice and/or the child welfare system is a necessary but not sufficient condition to being successful as a youth advocate. Organizations that hire youth advocates have a great responsibility to provide training and supervision that will help youth advocates to feel valued and supported, and to develop skills, set appropriate boundaries and engage in self-care.

Good training of youth advocates involves fostering the development of listening, engagement, collaboration, boundary setting and, last but not least, public speaking skills. Excellent listening

skills play a major factor in the work of youth advocates. Because so many youth have not been included in planning for their own care and are turned off to services, the development of good engagement and listening skills is critically important. Listening and engagement skills form the basis for discovering the youth's needs and preferences and a starting place for giving voice to the youth's concerns.

Specific skill training about system of care principles and values, community resources and collaboration across systems is also needed. Other important areas for skill development include wraparound principles and processes, and group facilitation. Information about the cultures and language used by the various child and youth service systems is also needed to help youth advocates function effectively as culture brokers for the youth. The availability of coaching and help with public speaking is also important for youth advocates, who are often called on to present a youth perspective in public forums and to make presentations about youth-related topics to other youth or providers within the community.

The work that we do is hard work and the challenges of many of the youth and families that we work with can be overwhelming for even the most seasoned professional. Close relationships between youth advocates and the youth they work with often develop. Individual supervision, opportunities to meet with other youth advocates and group supervision are important vehicles for providing the support needed so that advocates can safeguard their own well being and maintain appropriate limits and boundaries with the youth they serve.

Accountability and Evaluation

Since many organizations have never had youth advocates as staff members, it is especially important for the hiring organization to be very clear about the expectations for youth advocates and to revisit these expectations frequently as the organization and staff gain clarity about the role of youth advocates within their organization. These expectations should be clearly communicated in job descriptions and as part of performance appraisals.

Team meetings where all team members dis-

cuss how their work with youth is progressing provide a more informal means of ensuring that youth advocates are delivering quality services. Work with individual youth can be discussed and contact notes reviewed in the context of individual supervision meetings with all team members including youth advocates.

Final Thoughts

Youth advocacy, as defined in this article, is still in its infancy. There is still much that remains to be defined about the role and the proper place of youth advocates. As with any new frontier in social service practice, there is worry about using an unknown variable in the treatment process.

While there is a great deal of upside as we have described in involving peers within the wrap-around team, there is also the concern that negative outcomes can occur when vulnerable youth are put in contact with someone whose perspective has been formed through negative experiences in child-and-family serving systems.

We hope that by providing this primer on how to find youth advocates, how to utilize youth advocates, and how to train and develop youth advocates, we can put these concerns to rest, and increase the numbers of young people in the systems of care who are getting paid to help motivate others through their voices of experience.

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