



FYSB Family & Youth
Services Bureau

**Division of Runaway
and Homeless Youth**

Youth Peer Mentoring

January 2024

The Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) Program, provides resources for organizations whose programs and services support youth who are or at risk of experiencing homelessness, those contemplating running away and their families. Through the RHY Program, FYSB funds grants supporting street outreach, emergency shelters and longer-term transitional living and maternity group home programs to serve these young people.¹ Many RHY grant recipients have developed a Youth Peer Mentoring program to support these youth. This issue brief provides important information and resources for creating a youth peer mentoring program sponsored by your organization.

What is Youth Peer Mentoring?

Youth Peer mentoring is a relationship in which older youth and young adults offer advice and support to their younger peers. The relationship is less formal than those associated with traditional mentoring programs, and structured to be mutually beneficial, providing protocols upon which mentors can rely. When it comes to traditional mentoring, at times, youth can be intimidated when the mentor is much older. The youth could feel a sense of power dynamics or generational differences, decreasing the youth’s level of comfort with the mentoring relationship. However, with a peer mentor, the age gap is less dramatic, creating a space where youth may feel more secure to share relatable experiences and feelings.²

“ Kids that are easily intimidated by adults, specifically, among kids that are experiencing abuse or running away from home or does not have a healthy environment that they’ve grown up in, they’re more likely to lean on those peers. [This] is an important reason why youth to youth peer mentoring is really important and helpful.

Michaela Taylor | Christopher Youth Center, Safe Place Outreach Coordinator

“ I enjoy being helpful to help other kids who might be still struggling with personal situations. I try my best to listen to other kids in my class. I’ll try my best to be like this [helpful] because I would want to be honest in a situation like that and would like to treat others and I like to treat myself.

Youth Peer Mentor | Christopher Youth Center



The Value of Youth Peer Mentoring Programs

One of the primary barriers to creating effective intervention and prevention strategies to end youth homelessness is building open and trusting communication between providers and youth when it comes to goal setting, skill-building, program matching, and other key skills that help youth become successful.³ Involving youth in the design and evaluation of these strategies not only helps to identify critical, albeit subtle, issues faced by youth experiencing or at-risk of experiencing homelessness, but also helps to build trust between the organization and the youth, resulting in youthful clients who are less guarded and more open in their interaction with the organization.⁴

Youth Peer Mentors serve as a direct bridge demonstrating to mentees that the organization values youth voices and provides additional evidence of the organization’s value of youth experiences, opinions, and contributions to their programs. The mentors bring their lived experiences to the organization’s ability to support mentees.

Types of Mentoring Programs



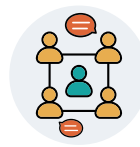
Traditional One-on-One Mentoring

A mentee and mentor are matched, either through a program or on their own. Mentee-mentor partners participate in a mentoring relationship with a structure and time frame of their making or as established by a formal mentoring program.



Virtual Mentoring

A mentoring relationship in which the two parties (or group) are in different locations. Sometimes called “virtual” mentoring.



Group Mentoring

A single mentor is matched with a cohort of mentees. Initial program structure is provided while allowing the mentor to direct progress, pace and activities.⁵

“ I might help people open up to trust me by talking online first, like through Snapchat or Instagram. So, I try to use both social media and in-person to talk like at lunch or the beginning of school in class.

Youth Peer Mentor | Christopher Youth Center

Continue →

The Benefits to Mentors and Mentees

Peer mentoring relationships often have a symbiotic relationship in which both the mentor and mentee learn and grow together. Residential Youth Services & Empowering (RYSE), a RHY Program grantee, has a youth peer mentoring program. They have observed several positive outcomes for their participants in their youth-to-youth peer mentoring relationship, specifically for young people experiencing homelessness, including increased social support, improved self-esteem, improved mental health, increase in willingness to engage in the program, trust and transparency, and a reduction of risk behaviors.

“Peer mentoring empowers youth (mentees) to take control of their own growth and development by providing them with resources, support, and a continuum of care they need to succeed. The mentor is someone of a similar age that has shared lived experiences, showing they have faced and overcome similar challenges or experiences. Peer mentoring allows a safe and inspiring environment and promotes confidence and resilience.

Nemesis Nichols | Residential Youth Services & Empowerment, Diversion and Outreach Program Manager

For Youth Mentors: ⁶



- Cultivates interpersonal and communication skills
- Influences how to best set boundaries and expectations for future relationships
- Provides an opportunity to directly contribute to positive changes in their community
- Increases self-awareness of strengths and areas in need of improvement which helps create better relationship-building skills in any environment
- Improves listening skills
- Provides important additions to resumes related to job experience and skills

Effective models for youth peer mentor programs include approaches for mentors who are paid or who volunteer. Youth peer mentors for the RHY program grantee Christopher Youth Center are volunteers, as their role of mentor is provided as a service to their peers and their communities. RHY program grantee Residential Youth Services & Empowerment (RYSE) provides a starting cash stipend for youth peer mentors paid weekly. Mentors can work up to 12 hours per week. After youth complete their training orientation, they are offered full or part-time employment with RYSE, with benefits.

For Youth Mentees: ^{7,8}

- Increases self-confidence, self-awareness and communications skills
- Enhances capacity for healthier relationships and lifestyle choices
- Improves goal-setting skills
- Increases preparedness in navigating challenges
- Creates an entire network of support they may not have been exposed to otherwise
- Allows room for exploring interests and strengths while simultaneously working on any areas that call for growth



“I have a few friends who struggle with what they want to do, what they want to be, how they see themselves. I find it pretty important that I learn to develop skills that help me to connect to people, understand how they're feeling, and how I may help them directly when they talk to me or just understand the problems or point them to someone that has better experience in helping.

Youth Peer Mentor | Christopher Youth Center

“When asked about becoming a mentor, I would say, I was a little bit hesitant at first about being a mentor. But I really got into the work of things and just being able to help other people.

Youth Peer Mentor | Christopher Youth Center



Benefits For Both: ^{9,10}

- Enhances self-esteem and self-confidence
- Advances social and interpersonal skills
- Improves sense of community
- Builds healthier relationships and lifestyle choices, including stronger relationships with parents, teachers, and peers
- Enhances attitude about school
- Improves behavior at home and school
- Boosts academic achievement
- Reduces delinquent behavior
- Reduces victimization
- Decreases likelihood of initiating drug and alcohol use
- Increases high school graduation rates
- Lowers high school dropout rates
- Increases college enrollment rates and educational aspirations

“*Parents really think it's a great program. I think that we're really lucky to have the parents that we've been able to work with this year because they have all been fantastic when it comes to scheduling. If they ever have any questions, they'll come and ask me. They've been wonderful.*

Michaela Taylor | Christopher Youth Center, Safe Place Outreach Coordinator

Peer Mentors in RHY Funded Programs

RHY programs are required to include youth engagement and collaboration in the development of key project strategies. Including a youth peer mentor program is one engagement strategy that can help RHY programs achieve this requirement.

Engaging paid or volunteer youth peer mentors as a member of the grantee's staff benefits programs in areas beyond outreach, education, and awareness strategies. Including the lived experience of youth peer mentors helps to ensure that interventions and solutions developed by RHY programs in all settings are based on practical strategies for helping clients learn critical life skills. These can include completing paperwork for programs and government benefits, learning skills for surviving on the street, everyday life skills, and overcoming the anxiety of exiting life on the streets which is experienced by many youth experiencing homelessness. The inclusion of youth peer mentors shows young people engaging with or entering the program for the first time that the

organization empowers youth and values their voice. Additionally, youth who are new to the program may initially engage better with someone who is their own age, with similar experiences, such as a youth peer mentor. Inviting youth who are exiting RHY programs to serve as peer mentors can also be a great way to keep youth engaged in their aftercare and follow up services.

In residential RHY programs, such as Transitional Living Programs, Maternity Group Home sites, and Basic Center Programs, youth peer mentors can help new clients become oriented to the program, the facility, and the neighborhood, sharing subtle nuances that adult program staff may not know or be able to effectively articulate. Youth peer mentors who are part of Street Outreach Program teams can be pivotal, not only in identifying locations to conduct outreach, but also in sharing resources that may not be known to adult workers, specifically resources within schools, and within informal social networks.

Continue →

Creating a Peer Mentoring Program

Developing a mentoring program is a great way to get involved and make a valuable contribution in the community. Taking time to carefully plan before the program begins can eliminate a lot of barriers during the implementation process.¹¹



The Steps: ¹²



1 ASSESS the needs and resources available in the community and see if there are existing programs with a similar mission or with which you might be able to collaborate.



2 DESIGN the parameters of the program. This can include:

- Define the youth population that will be served
- Identify who you will recruit as mentors
- Determine the type of mentoring relationships that will be offered
- Plan the details (e.g., where meetings will occur, how often mentors and mentees will meet, etc.)
- Determine desired outcomes
- Determine if the program will stand alone or collaborate with other programs
- Plan how the program will be evaluated



3 PLAN how the program will be managed. This can include:

- Identify a management team
- Establish policies and procedures
- Implement ongoing training
- Develop a financial plan



4 IMPLEMENT the program



5 Continuously **EVALUATE** the program and adjust as needed

“The schools are actually becoming more aware of the services that we have to provide to the adolescent community and are beginning to refer them out for us to assist them and provide immediate help.”

Genoris Bridges | Christopher Youth Center, Adolescent Services Division Director

Training for Peer Mentors

Training is an important step to ensure that youth mentors are prepared to appropriately support their mentees. Effective training helps build confidence in youth mentors and also helps them learn more about themselves, gaining skills in learning how they can react. RHY Program grantee, RYSE, advises organizations to consider establishing a youth peer mentoring program that includes training on Positive Youth Development, boundaries, self-care, and coping mechanisms to support peer mentors so they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively support their mentees. They also warn that insufficient training can directly affect turnover of mentors.

Provide training for mentors on:¹³

- Handling challenging scenarios with practice examples of how to handle these scenarios.
- Establishing protocols to ensure both the mentor and mentee feel supported and safe.
- Delegating an adult with whom peer mentors can share information regarding the situation and receive guidance on next steps to prioritize the mentee's safety.
- Tracking of mentor progress and mentee goals to measure progress.

Consider contacting Youth Action Boards¹⁴ members, who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness, to help refine training topics for your mentors. Their experience providing leadership and guidance to youth-serving organizations can provide insight into required mentor skill sets such as:

- Leadership development
- Skill sharing
- Diversity and inclusion
- Knowledge retention



Additional Resources

🔦 Peer Mentoring: Harnessing Positive Influence

🔦 Building Effective Building Effective Peer Mentoring Programs in Schools | An Introductory Guide

🔦 Peer Mentoring Guide | Tips for Quality Peer Mentoring Created By Peer Mentors and Youth Mentees

🔦 Youth Mentorship Best Practices

🔦 Out of This World: A Guide to Implementing Grounded Youth Peer Support

Sources: (1) <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/runaway-homeless-youth> | (2) <https://ojdp.ojp.gov/publications/peer-mentoring-guide> | (3, 4) <https://rhyclearinghouse.acf.hhs.gov/blog/2020/06/powerful-ingredients-lived-experience-young-people-supporting-rhy> | (5) <https://hr.ucdavis.edu/departments/learning/toolkits/mentoring/types> | (6, 7, 13) <https://ojdp.ojp.gov/publications/peer-mentoring-guide> | (8) https://teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/resource-files/TipSheetPeerMentoringFINAL_508Compliant.pdf | (9) https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/take-action-to-improvehealth/what-works-for-health/strategies/cross-age-youth-peer-mentoring#footnote_1 | (10) <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/mentoring/benefits-mentoringyoung-people> | (11, 12) <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/mentoring/considerations-starting-mentoring-program> | (14) A decision-making entity made up of youth and young adults who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness. Youth Action Boards (YABs), provide leadership and guidance in partnership with other key stakeholders. <https://www.tacinc.org/resources/the-gab-on-yabs/> and https://rhyclearinghouse.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/6_HUD_YAB_Youth-Action-Board-Pathways-to-Leadership.pdf