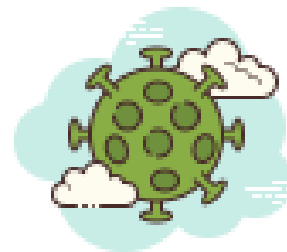


# YOUTH MOVE NATIONAL™

## PEER CENTER ISSUE BRIEF

## Adapting Youth Peer Support in a Pandemic



### BACKGROUND

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Young adults of transition age, generally defined as ages 16 to 25, are a unique population, and while they have similar issues to younger adolescents, they face greater barriers to accessing healthcare (Adams, et al., 2020). As young adults transition from childhood to adulthood, mental health service use declines, in part due to barriers to care. There is a clear divide between the child and adult systems, each of which has different eligibility criteria and treatment coverage impacting continuity of care and engagement in services (Delman & Klodnick, 2017). The novel coronavirus of 2019 (COVID-19) has caused massive disruptions to the mental health service delivery system and there have been both immediate and long-term direct and indirect impacts on youth and young adults. Covid-19 is a contagious disease that affects all age groups. People aged 65 and older are more likely to have worse outcomes than that the general population, however youth and young adults remain at risk. . A new study found that close to one third of

young adults are medically vulnerable to severe COVID-19 illness, with smoking being the greatest risk factor in this population (Adams, Park, Schaub, Brindis, & Irwin, 2020). In addition to physical vulnerability, there is significant concern about the psychological and mental health impacts of disruptions of day-to-day life, including social isolation, financial strain, and reduced access to resources.



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COVID-19 has created new and more intensive barriers to accessing services while also increasing youth needs (Elliot & Garcia, 2020). New studies have found the pandemic has been associated with mental health challenges and increased use of substances to cope with stress or manage emotions (Czeisler et al., 2020). For example, many families are seeing a significant increase in overall household stress and report an increase of depression and anxiety in their children, as well as difficulties engaging in remote learning (Elliot & Garcia, 2020). The ripple effects of social distancing on youth are only just beginning to be understood, and youth may be experiencing trauma without intervention or support, including youth peer support (YPS). Youth peer support (YPS) is a rapidly emerging practice designed to support youth and young adults experiencing substance use disorders or mental health conditions. Like adult or family peer support services, young adults receive support from those with similar lived experience to facilitate connection to other informal and formal supports to foster resiliency and recovery. YPS includes emotional support, guidance, education, skills training, and advocacy for youth and young adults by other young people with personal histories of substance use or mental health conditions and utilization of services (Roussos, Berger, & Harrison, 2008). This non-traditional approach to recovery has augmented the traditional mental health service delivery system and young people have identified it as a valuable component of their recovery.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YPS SERVICE DELIVERY**

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Communities across the country are actively responding to a rapidly changing environment and are increasingly providing services and supports to youth using virtual platforms. These adaptations in practice provide additional opportunities for increasing access to services but may also require additional changes in policy and the types of technical assistance that are provided to organizations in order to successfully implement these services. Further, there is little information available to know the structures and content that are being utilized within the virtual meetings or how effective these approaches may be compared to in-person services. To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on peer service delivery, YMN conducted semi-structured interviews and surveys, lasting approximately 30 minutes each with 24 youth peer providers nationwide. YMN's efforts were designed to increase knowledge of current practices being used by youth peer providers to inform policy and practice recommendations. A report, entitled "The State of Youth Peer Support During COVID-19" outlined the findings of the interviews, including barriers and facilitators to delivering YPS during a pandemic.



Interview and survey responses indicated that the most frequent pathway for providing YPS has been through individual phone calls, texting and via Zoom or other virtual platforms.

Youth have become increasingly comfortable engaging with technology; however, there are youth who continue to express a stronger preference for face-to-face interactions.



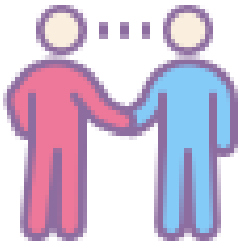
Although youth peer providers have innovated a wide array of strategies to engage youth, peers report that youth engagement in a virtual environment frequently comes with some unique obstacles. There are equity concerns, particularly around socioeconomic status, as some youth experience obstacles with accessing technology equipment such as phones, tablets, and laptops. However, in some cases, access to virtual YPS was perceived to promote equity by allowing opportunities for youth who might not otherwise have transportation or ability to engage with peers on a frequent basis, like those living in suburban or rural communities. Equity and accessibility will need to be considered in an ongoing basis. While some peer respondents reported increased communication, they also shared that the quality of interactions have declined in some instances. For example, youth peer providers shared that young people are better able to ignore communications and that virtual environments are prone to additional distractions. To encourage engagement, peers have adapted their approaches by incorporating virtual activities. Games were frequently cited as a medium for building conversations and relationships. Other strategies included watching videos together, YouTube, Netflix parties, doing hair, poetry nights, art groups, and cooking classes. To facilitate this process, some peer providers shared they prepared bags and other materials that could be dropped off to youth at their homes. These activity bags included items such as yoga mats, spa kits, canvas and paints, and other materials that promote ability to participate in meetings. By providing these supplies and activities youth can still have access to a similar connection they had prior to COVID-19.

Another identified challenge of delivering YPS virtually was confidentiality and privacy. With many families practicing social distancing from home, youth may be hesitant to openly talk about their experiences or feelings. It is recommended that organizational practices are in place to ensure the safety of youth accessing services. Providers should work with young people to identify solutions that will make them feel safe and comfortable. Examples of this include having safe words to indicate to a provider that youth are no longer alone and/or in physical danger, speaking with a provider over the phone while going for a walk outside of the home, and maximizing the chat or text functions for sensitive topics (Herman-Kritz, 2020).

Despite the challenges of transitioning to virtual YPS, opportunities for engaging youth exist. Peer support in a virtual environment provides the option to engage youth who may otherwise have difficulty meeting in person. At a time when young people have lost many social connections, YPS plays an important role in supporting youth mental health and well-being during the pandemic. Based on the feedback of youth peer providers, there are recommendations of best practices for engaging youth in a way that ensures youth voice is included, celebrated, and supported in service delivery.



## **Embed a youth engagement philosophy that meets youth where they are.**



Accepting young people and their way of being, culturally, is crucial for connecting with youth. This requires a set of relationship-based values and principles. Taking a flexible and individual-based approach can increase the likelihood of successful and authentic engagement. When youth are valued and respected, they are likely to feel safe and calm, as well as grow and experiment within a natural youth development process.

## **Allocate funding specific to youth and young adult's basic needs.**



Connecting with youth helps to identify how their needs can be adequately met. Youth often know what's best for them and their experience. Acknowledge that physiological needs and safety needs are primary aspects of youth engagement. Providing paid opportunities for young people and equipping them with resources builds their overall capacity to participate and contribute to the peer support process.

## **Reduce barriers to participation in systems and services.**



Consider logistical barriers such as access to technology, internet connection, transportation, expenses, and other accessibility-related barriers when engaging youth. To best maintain connections with youth, it is helpful to have a grounded understanding of their circumstances. Youth are often navigating socioeconomic, cultural, and family situations. Consider how these factors shape your relationships and use this lens to develop an awareness for supporting ongoing needs. Making accommodations in the approaches and practices of YPS, while creating multiple points of engagement opportunities, will best suit the preferences of the youth being served. Partnering with youth to create group norms and develop best practices can also assist with the youth engagement process.



## **Implement trauma-sensitive environments and allow youth to express their feelings and experiences with mental health.**



Creating trauma-sensitive environments help youth feel safe, welcomed, and supported. A shift in organizational culture is required for systems and services to become trauma-sensitive. Establishing policies, procedures, and protocols to promote trauma-sensitive practices are key. Listening and learning from youth about more effective ways to design and implement services will help with overall outreach, engagement, and retention.

## **Offer resources and opportunities for activities that are of interest to youth.**



Connect youth to organizations and/or groups that are beneficial to their growth, health, and well-being. Gather feedback and make space for their opinions and contributions. Ask youth what they like to do and what their hobbies are. Include youth at key decision points and embrace their contributions. This gives youth a sense of purpose and higher meaning. Be sure to consistently communicate up-to-date information about current and future events.

### **CONCLUSION**

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It is critically important that attention is given to youth mental health during this public health crisis to mitigate long-term impacts and repercussions (Hawke, et al., 2020). To address unmet needs during COVID-19, service adaptations and response strategies must occur through a developmental lens (Hawke et al., 2020). YPS is an important part of the mental health service array that promotes wellness and resiliency. During this time of social isolation and increased levels of anxiety and depression, YPS offers connection and facilitates engagement with mental health services. While crises and disasters cannot be avoided, their consequences can be minimized by equipping youth with the skills to cope and have the necessary support to foster resilience and growth. Throughout this all, youth voice must be centered in developing solutions as the United States continues to experience this public health crisis.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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