

Project
AWARE



Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SAMHSA



Healthy
Transitions



Lived Experience as the Foundation to Success: Youth Coordinators as Key to Program Planning and Implementation

In 2014, SAMHSA awarded Healthy Transitions (HT) grants to 16 agencies across the country—and funded the accompanying Technical Assistance Center (TAC)—as part of a national effort to improve mental health support services for youth and young adults. HT grantees were tasked with focusing on the needs of 16-25-year-olds who have, or may be at risk of developing, serious mental health conditions.

Within this context, each grantee was required to include a full-time Youth Coordinator (YC) position, staffed by a young adult with lived experience—someone who had professional skills and relevant personal experiences. This unique set-up meant that there were project staff who could bring real-life perspectives to the planning

and implementation of grant activities. For many grantees, incorporating Youth Coordinators into their agencies necessitated rethinking policies, procedures, structures, and organizational climate.

Based on four years of TAC experience working with HT grantees and direct feedback from Youth Coordinators, themselves, *Lived Experiences as the Foundation to Success* provides considerations for Youth Coordinators and the supervisors that support them. The information is organized into three chronological sections (Preparation, YCs in Action, and Sustainability) and is meant to be used by HT grantees and any agency with a similar desire to successfully engage young adult staff members with lived experience.

Section 1: Preparation

Considerations for Young Adults

Dream Big, Reflect, and Get Feedback

- Know yourself, what you want from this particular job, your strengths, and your goals.
- Ask supervisors, colleagues, teachers, mentors, friends, and/or family members to share the things that they most admire about you.
- Reflect on how sharing your lived experience through work inspires you.

Do Your Research

- Find out more about the organization and project. Check online and ask around.
- Try to answer these questions: Is this role, project, and organization a good fit for me? What unique skills, experiences, and talents can I bring to this job? What do I hope to learn from this experience?

Make Your Application Stand Out!

- You are awesome! Stay confident and be yourself! Let them know why you are the perfect fit for this job.
- Pay close attention to the application details. Find out what information they want and when they want it. Make sure to submit requested materials (application form, resume, cover letter) on time and in the format they ask for.
- Get feedback on your application materials before submitting. Ask a mentor, friend, or family member to help you put your best foot forward.

Get Ready for Your Interview

- Plan to answer three key questions: Why do you want this job and in what ways do you hope to grow? How will your experiences, skills, and talents help you succeed in this role? How does this job align with your long term professional goals?
- Practice, practice, practice! Find interview tips online, at your local library, or at a nearby college. The more you prepare for the interview, the more confident and less nervous you will be on the big day.



Considerations for Supervisors

Get Your Organization Ready

- Set the tone within your organization early (before the hiring process begins). Identify and discuss the strategic value in hiring young adults with lived experience.
- Collaborate with agency leaders, staff, and program participants to reflect on organizational culture, assess readiness, and develop any policies/procedures necessary to ensure Youth Coordinators are set up to succeed. Codify agency-wide expectations and shared responsibility for working with young adults in collaborative, respectful, and meaningful ways.
- Consider issues of pay equity.

**Communicate
clearly.**

Identify Quality Candidates

- Develop a job description that clearly defines the role, context, desired skills and experience, application requirements, hiring process, organizational commitment to young adult staff with lived experiences, and which allows for the position to grow and evolve over time.
- Look outside the typical avenues for advertising the position to meet potential candidates where they are. Share the job posting with program youth, youth-serving partner organizations, local colleges, and community centers. And, of course, leverage your agency website and social media channels to cast a wide net.
- Young adults with lived experience may have a variety of nontraditional assets and career paths. Develop a clear and consistent applicant review process, in line with existing agency policy, to ensure candidates are evaluated fairly. Consider engaging multiple people (staff and program youth) in the hiring process to benefit from various perspectives. Develop a metric to factor in lived experience in similar ways to previous job experiences.

Interview and Select Your New Youth Coordinator!

- Communicate clearly with potential candidates about interview expectations and protocols, including, time, appropriate attire, required documents, interviewer(s) names/roles, and anticipated interview structure.
- After top candidates are interviewed, convene the interview team to discuss each candidate, their assets, potential for growth, and overall fit for the role.

Section 2: Youth Coordinators in Action

Considerations for Young Adults

Finding Your Place

- Congratulations! Your skills, experiences, and hard work have gotten you this uniquely impactful position.
- There is so much to learn and so much to do right from the start. No one expects you to know everything overnight! Take some time to get to know the organization, your roles and responsibilities, your new colleagues, program youth, and organizational partners in the community. Build up your knowledge base and your professional network.
- Find the people you can learn from, collaborate with, and have some fun.

Develop a Relationship with Your Supervisor

- Clarify your role, responsibilities, expectations, evaluation process, growth opportunities, internal and external communication guidelines, and available supports from your supervisor and agency.
- Talk to your supervisor about the new skills you want to develop while you are a Youth Coordinator.
- Ask questions when you have them. Ask for help when you need it. Ask for clarification when you are unsure.
- Share your successes! Make sure your supervisor knows what a great job you are doing.

Develop a Relationship with Program Participants

- The young adults in your program want the same thing you wanted when you were their age (and you are probably very close in age): respect, opportunity, purpose, support, and caring. As a Youth Coordinator, you can use your role to support the project and the youth involved by being an advocate, collaborator, cheerleader, and trusted adult.
- It is likely that you and the youth you work with are close in age and that can sometimes make this job hard, especially at first. You may have worked together before or you may even be friends, so it is important to clarify roles and expectations early on so everyone is on the same page. Existing relationships with program youth can strengthen the project if you focus on shared responsibility, mutual respect, and personal accountability.

Support Your Own Growth

- Set personal goals and revisit them often. Ask yourself these questions: What do I want to learn during my time as Youth Coordinator? How might this position propel me forward in career and life? You will have many different jobs and roles in life and each is an opportunity to learn something new.
- Find supportive allies within your organization and in the field. This might be your supervisor, a mentor, someone from a partner agency, or that one person in every office that always knows how to use the copy machine, where the snacks are hidden, and what to wear to a staff meeting.

Considerations for Supervisors

Be a Bridge and a Buffer

- You are the bridge between the Youth Coordinator and the rest of the organization. Help them make strategic connections to further their work and career.
- Talk about the value of the Youth Coordinator to your project and the agency overall. Model respectful communication, appropriate boundaries, and meaningful collaboration with young adults.
- Help young adults navigate organizational culture, policies and practices, and supports. Eliminate barriers to successful integration of Youth Coordinators into the work environment. Advocate for their needs.

Support Personal Growth and Program Success

- Provide clear tasks, high expectations, context, and relevance for work assignments.
- Work with the Youth Coordinator to set personal and professional goals while they are in this position and revisit them often. Meet regularly to discuss progress, challenges, roles and responsibilities, and opportunities for growth.
- Encourage young adults to take advantage of internal and external learning opportunities, including observation, shadowing, professional development, webinars, local events, etc. Foster networking and relationship development.
- Give clear, consistent, and meaningful feedback, both formal and informal. Provide opportunities for Youth Coordinators to give you feedback, for a reciprocal commitment to growth.
- Request feedback from the Youth Coordinator about how you are doing and brainstorm helpful aspects of supervision that could be added.

Strengthen Your Adult Ally Skills

- You are more than a supervisor, you are an ally helping guide the professional development of someone early in their career. It takes honesty, reflection, humility, curiosity, and vulnerability to connect authentically and build mutually beneficial working relationships.
- Ensure true leadership opportunities are available, where Youth Coordinators can utilize their assets, skills, experiences, values, expertise, and energy.
- Reflect often and encourage your Youth Coordinator to do the same.
- Learn from the Youth Coordinator and allow them to “keep you honest” as you incorporate young adult-driven practices.

Give Credit Where Credit is Due

- Youth Coordinators are incredibly important factors in program authenticity, outcomes, and all-around success. Celebrate them often and share their highlights with colleagues and partners.
- Help Youth Coordinators see success and opportunity, even in times of perceived failure.

Section 3: Sustainability

Considerations for Young Adults

Build Strong Programs and Systems

- Incorporate regular cycles of reflection and feedback in your work. Ask for feedback from program youth, colleagues, and partner organizations. Use formal and informal feedback to strengthen programming and increase impact.
- Track progress and share lessons learned with colleagues and partners.
- Advocate for youth voice and leadership to be integrated into organizational systems and efforts.
- Be active in planning for your own exit and beyond. Whether your grant is ending, you have aged out of the position, or you are moving on for other reasons, you can help ensure youth and young adults remain in leadership positions long after you leave. Identify and share ways you think the organization can strengthen its commitment to and support of the next Youth Coordinator (or similar position).



Support the Next Generation of Youth Leaders

- Provide opportunities for youth to think, collaborate, lead, stumble, reflect, grow, and succeed.
- Continue to lead by example and model authenticity, courage, resilience, hard work, compassion, and vision.
- Advocate for meaningful leadership pipelines where program youth develop the knowledge, skills, and aptitudes to grow into the next Youth Coordinator role.

Prioritize Self-Care

- Focus on improving your own physical and emotional health throughout your time as Youth Coordinator. Set boundaries with program youth and colleagues, find someone to talk to, make time to rest and take care of yourself, exercise, eat well, and remember that you are the exact right person at the exact right time to be doing this work.



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Considerations for Supervisors

Sustain and Grow Youth Coordinator Positions

- Prepare and plan for your Youth Coordinator to age out of the position within the life of the grant, if relevant.
- Work to sustain the state-level Youth Coordinator position beyond the grant through partnerships, new grants, braided funding, etc.
- Work to increase the number of paid positions available for young adults with lived experience at the state level.
- Consider ways to support and encourage the creation of local Youth Coordinators, utilizing lessons learned from the state-level position.

Strengthen Systemic Youth/Young Adult Supports

- Advocate for the integration of youth and young adult voice, choice, and leadership across the agency, especially in relation to youth-serving programs.
- Identify and share personal and professional lessons learned that can help support other young adults and their supervisors in similar roles. Share resources and tools that you developed with your Youth Coordinator or that you found particularly helpful.
- Establish a career ladder or talent pipeline for recruiting, training, supporting, and hiring youth and young adults with lived experience throughout the agency. Consider modeling this process after existing frameworks that may exist for other positions and programs.

Prioritize Self-Care

- Just as important as programmatic sustainability is your own ability to stay healthy, focused, impactful, reflective, and happy in career and life. Make sure to set boundaries around work-life balance, find someone to talk to, carve out time for rest and take care of yourself, exercise, eat well, and remember that you are the exact right person at the exact right time to be doing this work.

