

“Walk a mile in my shoes.” That’s an old saying that has great truth behind it. What better way to relate to another person than being able to share similar experiences?

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) Youth Support Partner (YSP) Unit is staffed by young adults who have had personal experience in some channel of the human services system. They share the insights they have gained with youth currently in the system, advocating for them and serving as mentors. It’s a model that improves outcomes for both the mentor and mentee.

Started in 2008, the YSP Unit is the only program of its kind in the country, assisting youth with a variety of needs. It has been so well received that the number of Youth Support Partners has grown from four when it began to 25 in 2015. They serve more than 400 youth a year. As the Unit has expanded it has added specialized personnel such as supervisor/coaches. Curricula and trainings are being developed all the time as well. The Youth Support Partner Unit is an outstanding example of how DHS every day advances its mission to support the county’s vulnerable populations.


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DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Youth Support Partners



Some of the names in these stories have been changed to protect privacy.

The first things you notice about Mia are her determination and intelligence. While she talks about the downside of needing to be placed in foster care at age 14, she also acknowledges an upside. To her, that’s taking what she has learned in care and mapping a life path.

“You make your own vision,” she said, chatting about the motivational music she puts on in the morning

when she wakes her brother and they begin their day.

That doesn’t mean Mia doesn’t need or appreciate help. As she graduated from high school and reached age 18, a trying time in life for anyone, let alone youth without adequate support from family members, Mia discovered the Allegheny Department of Human Services’ Youth Support Partner (YSP) Unit.

Her caseworker referred her and she was assigned to a young woman who herself had been in foster care. In her Youth Support Partner, Mia found a kindred soul.

“I appreciate her so much,” Mia said. “She’s always supportive in any situation I’m going through. When I feel ‘I can’t do it,’ she lifts me. She says, ‘You know you can do it. You have it. You just need more guidance. You can make it to the finish line.’”

But Mia’s Youth Support Partner doesn’t coddle her. “She tells me when I’m not doing right. She says, ‘Mia, you gotta...’”

A willing ear, a shoulder to cry on, a port in a storm – clichés perhaps, but all accurately describe the role of a DHS Youth Support Partner in providing the crucial mentorship and advocacy for young people, age 14 and up who are in the county’s human service system, as they begin to face the demands of adulthood and self-sufficiency.

Youth Support Partners are selected in part for having successfully navigated foster care, behavioral or mental health treatment, intellectual disability, or the juvenile justice system. A Youth Support Partner has a minimum of a high school degree or General Educational Development (GED®) diploma and at least one year’s worth of combined work experience.

Besides working one-on-one with youth such as Mia, they advocate for youth and bring insights to two key DHS case management practices – Conferencing and Teaming and High Fidelity Wraparound. Both practices use teams that include the youth

and family members, friends, educators, caseworkers and more to develop plans of action and devise solutions for youth in need. They also advocate for youth at the local and state level, presenting at DHS and community meetings and court roundtables, for example.

Importantly, Youth Support Partners, too, benefit in many ways from their work. The YSP Unit is a two-way model, offering valuable employment training, such as being punctual, following dress codes, working with teams and managing caseloads. YSPs get ongoing training and coaching so they are prepared to adequately respond to and support youth who are dealing with complex emotional and behavioral issues.

Lacey has been a Youth Support Partner for two years. She is enthusiastic about her job because, she says, she has seen the value of being a role model in particular.

“I think it’s really powerful for a youth to see that there are people who have been through the system and are now successful and making choices,” Lacey said. “A lot of times kids in placement don’t realize that they have choices.”

Lacey is able to relate especially well to youth who are having emotional problems. She had suffered from depression and anxiety but was not able to get treatment until she was a young adult. So she is able to assist youth to recognize those problems and advocate for them, ensuring in her role as part of a youth’s wraparound team that his or her voices are heard.

She also makes sure youth recognize the importance of identifying and sharing their opinions and preferences. “A lot of times youth have trouble opening up to service providers,” she said. “We Youth Support Partners can meet them in the community, take walks with them, have coffee.”

She related a story where, on a walk with one youth, they passed a house in which the youth had once lived. The experience opened a floodgate of emotion for the youth, who was able to talk to Lacey about the abuse she had experienced in that house. “That was something she had not opened up to other people about. That was just through that walk.”

Lacey also advocated for a transgender youth who had been dealing with not feeling respected in his treatment because the pronouns he preferred were not being used. “Now this youth is participating in treatment and getting what is needed out of that,” she said.

“I think that when youth are viewed and talked about in a positive way, they are able to view themselves in a more positive way,” she said, adding that her experiences as a Youth Support Partner have convinced her to pursue a master’s degree in social work.

“I like feeling like I’m helping people,” Lacey said. “But also, to me, it’s an honor to get to know someone’s story and be a part of their life. That makes me feel more complete every time I hear another person’s experience and I’m able to be on that journey with them.”