

# ***Trailblazing the Future of Youth Peer Support***

**A YOUTH-DRIVEN POLICY GUIDE**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA'S  
**YOUTH POLICY  
ACCELERATOR**

**MHA**  
Mental Health America

## Acknowledgments

Founded in 1909, Mental Health America (MHA) is the nation's leading national nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of mental health, well-being, and illness prevention. Our work is informed, designed, and led by the lived experience of those most affected. MHA's mission is to advance the mental health and well-being of all people living in the U.S. through public education, research, advocacy, public policy, and direct service.

**This report is informed by the work and leadership of Mental Health America's inaugural Youth Policy**

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*August 2024*



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## Executive Summary

Youth peer support creates connections between young people with shared identities and mental health experiences, offering mutual support and empowerment. Programs and services range from broad community-centered initiatives to specialized one-on-one support from certified youth peer support specialists. Crucially, peer support stands on its own as a unique and essential mental health resource for young people, fostering recovery journeys and enhancing holistic well-being alongside or independently of clinical services.

This paper and findings are driven by members of Mental Health America's inaugural Youth Policy Accelerator (YPA). The YPA is a national leadership program designed to support young adults with the skills, connections, and opportunities to advance mental health policy change. In addition to lived and professional expertise, this report was informed by a national survey of individuals working in youth peer support. It outlines policy recommendations to ensure all young people across the United States have access to peer support when and where they need it.

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## Key Recommendations

### 1. Expand Access

Expand access to youth peer support programs and services, including school-based programs, youth warmlines, and crisis response services, to meet young people where they are.

### 3. Increase Funding

Increase funding pathways and opportunities for youth peer support programs alongside community outreach and education.

### 5. Incorporate Youth Leadership

Elevate and integrate youth peer support leaders across all decision-making bodies, including agency leadership, and as part of grant design, review, and selection.

### 2. Support Research

Fund research to document the impact of youth peer support across settings, populations, and program types.

### 4. Sustain the Workforce

Prioritize the sustainability and diversity of the youth peer support workforce by investing in training, supervision, and living wages.

- 1** | **Expand access to youth peer support programs and services, including school-based programs, youth warmlines, and crisis response services, to meet young people where they are.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**The Centers for Medicaid and CHIP Services** should provide guidance for coverage and billing of peer support services in schools.

**Congress** should authorize and fund SAMHSA to establish a national network that links existing peer support warmlines under one number, including warmlines designed by and for youth and young adults.

- 2** | **Fund research to document the impact of youth peer support across settings, populations, and program types.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**The National Institute of Mental Health** should prioritize funding research on youth peer support and services within its portfolio.

**Congress** should provide additional funding for youth research, including research on youth peer support.

**The Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation in the US Department of Health and Human Services** should collect data on youth peer support services' use and impact on mental health outcomes.

# 3

**Increase funding for youth peer support programs alongside community outreach and education.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**SAMHSA** should encourage grantees to fund youth peer-to-peer programs within general grant programs, where peer support is a potential use of the funds. This would be especially helpful in school programs, and SAMHSA can partner with agencies like the Department of Education when necessary.

**Congress** should pass legislation that allows the state Mental Health Block Grants to include a set-aside or allowable use of services for mental health promotion and prevention that prioritizes youth peer programs and services.

# 4

**Prioritize the sustainability and diversity of the youth peer support workforce by investing in training, supervision, and living wages.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)** should prioritize youth peer support specialist training and supervision within its behavioral health workforce development programs like the Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training- Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults (BHWET-CAY) Program for Professionals.

**Congress** should significantly increase funding for youth peer support and activities offered by HRSA's workforce development programs with a particular focus on initiatives that increase diversity within the mental health workforce, including race, ethnicity, disability, and gender.

**Congress** should increase reimbursement match rates for youth peer support services to ensure a living wage that acknowledges the value that youth peer specialists provide. This includes increasing the Medicaid match for youth behavioral health or all behavioral health services.

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**CMS** should review youth peer support reimbursement rates, as documented in the Peer Recovery Center for Excellence's 2024 report, *Medicaid Reimbursement for Peer Support Services: A Detailed Analysis of Rates, Processes, and Procedures*. For states paying significantly below the median rates from similar states, CMS should determine how they arrived at their current rate and ensure reasonable rates for youth peer services.

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**SAMHSA** should create standards for certified youth peer support specialists, including standards specific to crisis and schools, similar to those published for the *National Model Standards for Peer Support Certification*.

## 5

**Include youth peer support leaders across all decision-making bodies, including agency leadership, and as part of grant design, review, and selection.**

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Establish Youth Advisory Boards within all relevant agencies** to provide continuous input and feedback on policies and programs. Ensure these boards are diverse and inclusive, representing a wide range of youth experiences, including those from marginalized communities.

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**Engage youth leaders for consultation at every stage of policy development** through regular focus groups, surveys, and town hall meetings and develop mechanisms to ensure youth feedback is gathered and acted upon in policy decisions.

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**Actively hire youth leaders with peer support experience for decision-making and grant review panels.** For participating youth, provide comprehensive training and ongoing support to these youth leaders for effective participation in the review process.

## MHA's 2023-2024 Youth Policy Accelerator

This report is co-authored by Mental Health America's Youth Policy Accelerator (YPA) members and MHA staff. YPA is an annual program that equips young leaders nationwide with the skills, relationships, and opportunities to advance youth peer support via federal policy. From October 2023 to June 2024, ten leaders in our inaugural YPA cohort engaged in extensive training, hosted town halls, authored articles, met with legislators, presented at events, launched a national youth peer support coalition, and conducted original policy research. Throughout the program, the YPA witnessed a growing interest in youth priorities and how to expand access to youth peer-to-peer programs and youth peer specialist services at all levels, including from legislators and administrators.

You can learn more about the YPA [here](#).



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