

NYC YOUTH PEER ADVOCACY

A SURVEY OF YOUTH PEER ADVOCATES
IN NEW YORK CITY 2017/2018

A REPORT BY THE NYC HEALTH
DEPARTMENT, IN COLLABORATION
WITH THE NYC FIELD OFFICE OF THE
NYS OFFICE OF MENTAL HEALTH



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**ANALYSTS, AUTHORS &
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

BACKGROUND & METHODS



BACKGROUND:

A youth peer advocate (YPA) is a young person between the ages of 18 and 30 who uses their personal experience to support, advise and empower other youth. YPAs serve in a variety of settings and ways to help youth reach their goals. YPAs may provide social and emotional support, training, guidance in navigating youth-serving systems and more. Above all, YPAs are guided by empathy and firsthand experience. In this way, they are uniquely poised to meaningfully connect with youth.

In New York City (NYC), several NYC and New York (NY) State contracted mental health programs employ YPAs, including Family Resource Centers, Adolescent Skills Centers, inpatient and outpatient programs and the NYS Office of Mental Health (OMH) Home and Community Based Services waiver programs.

To better understand the roles and experiences of NYC YPAs, the NYC Health Department and the NYC Field Office of OMH developed and distributed a survey to all YPAs working in these agencies' contracted programs. Questions covered three broad areas: the role of YPAs, job satisfaction and job supports.

This report presents the survey results, interpretations and recommendations from youth leaders and advocates for employers of YPAs, government agencies and other key stakeholders.

METHODS:

- The NYC Health Department and OMH distributed the survey using Survey Monkey to 30 YPAs in March 2017. Survey responses were received from 25 YPAs.
- Due to incomplete responses by one YPA respondent, 25 respondents completed questions one through nine and 24 respondents completed questions 10 through 43.
- Frequencies were generated using IBM SPSS version 23. Qualitative content analyses were performed using RQDA version 0.2-1.

RESULTS

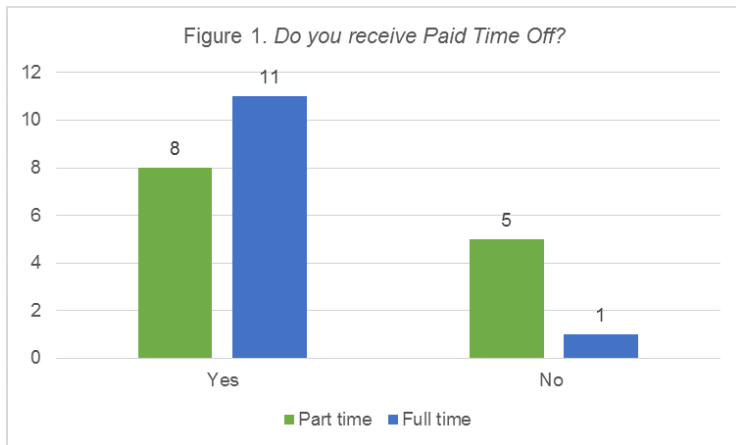
ROLE OF THE YPA

A. PAY, BENEFITS AND EXPERIENCE

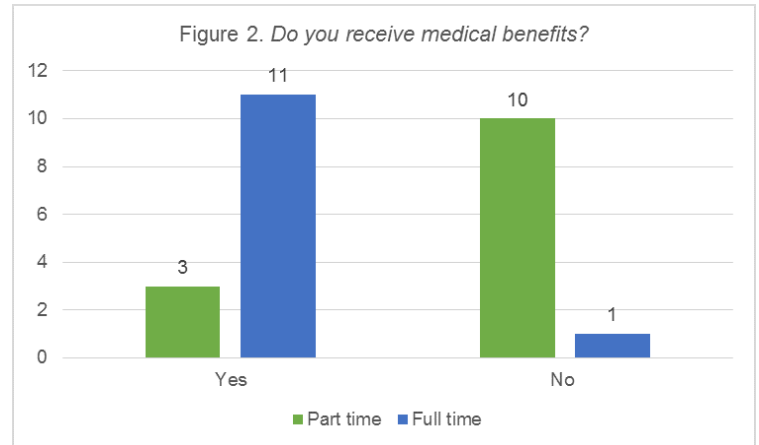
Among the 25 YPAs surveyed:

- 18 reported that their YPA position was their only paid job
- 18 reported that they were students
- 13 reported working part time and 12 reported working full time

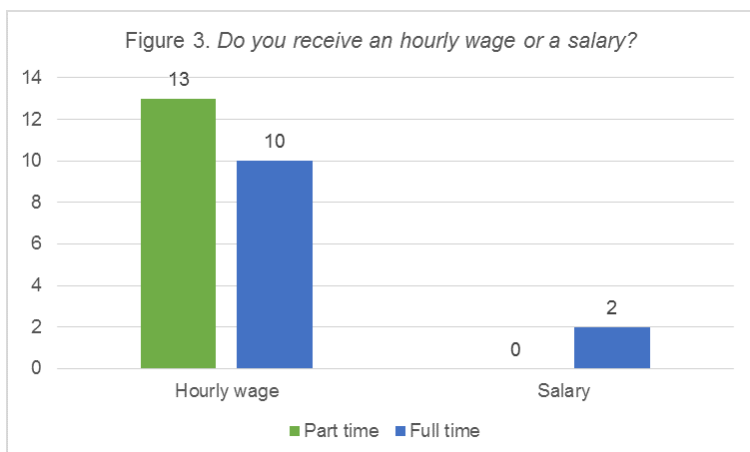
Figure 1. YPAs who received paid time off (PTO).



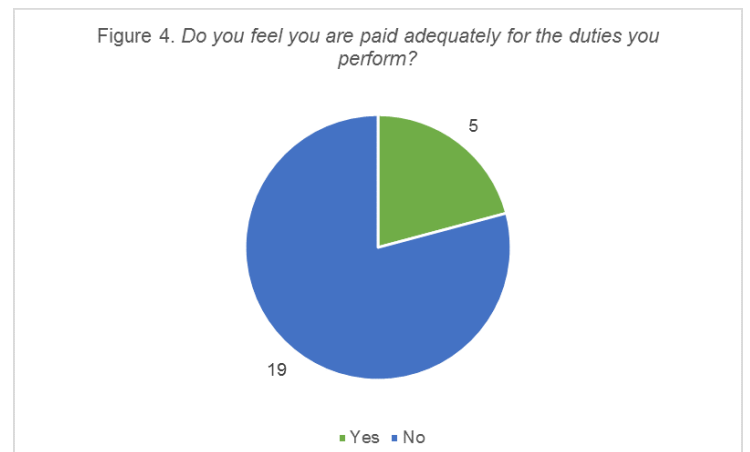
Most full-time YPAs reported receiving medical benefits. Most part-time YPAs did not. Figure 2. YPAs who received medical benefits.



Almost all of the YPAs reported receiving hourly wages instead of a salary. Figure 3. Pay schedule for YPAs.



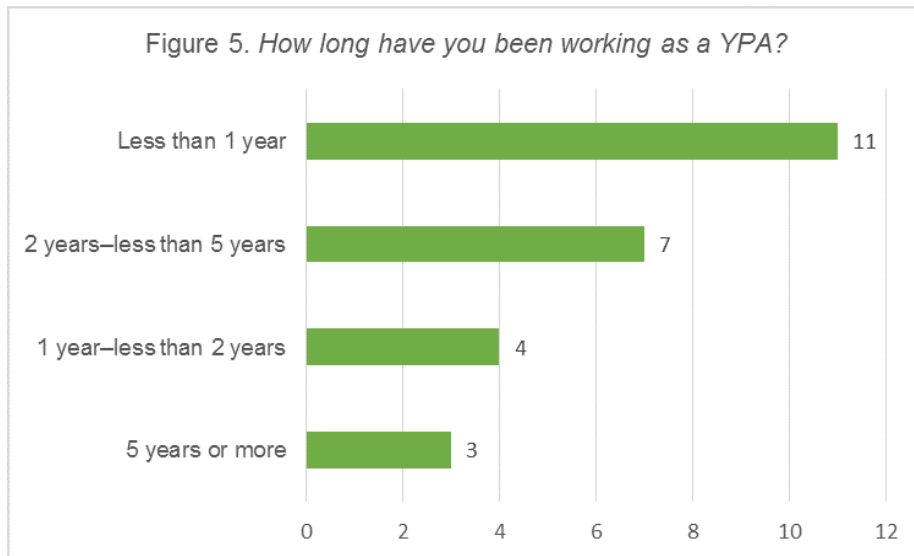
When asked if they thought they were paid adequately, 19 out of 24 YPAs chose no. Figure 4. Opinions on adequate pay.



RESULTS



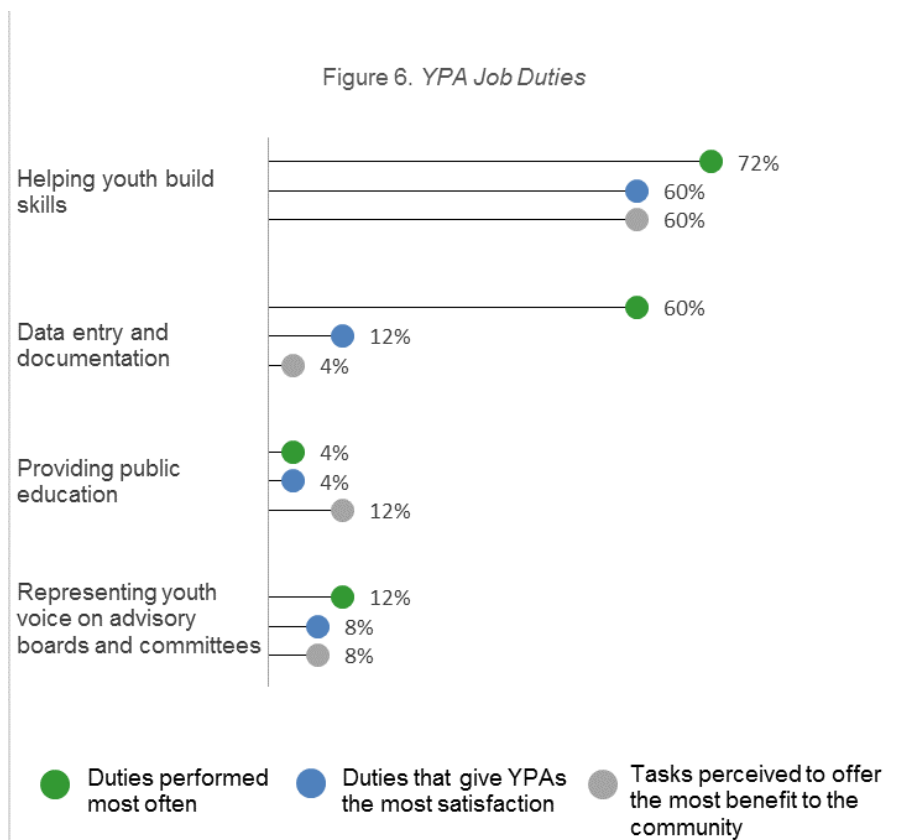
Of the 25 YPAs surveyed, 11 had worked in the role for less than one year. Figure 5. Number of years of experience.



B. JOB DUTIES

YPAs were asked to select the job duties that:

- They perform most often
- Give them the greatest satisfaction
- Offer the most benefit to the community they serve



RESULTS



The duties that YPAs performed the most often, gave them the greatest satisfaction and benefited the community the most were helping youth build skills (e.g., managing psychiatric symptoms, creating wellness plans and navigating service systems) and helping youth with self-advocacy, self-efficacy and self-empowerment.

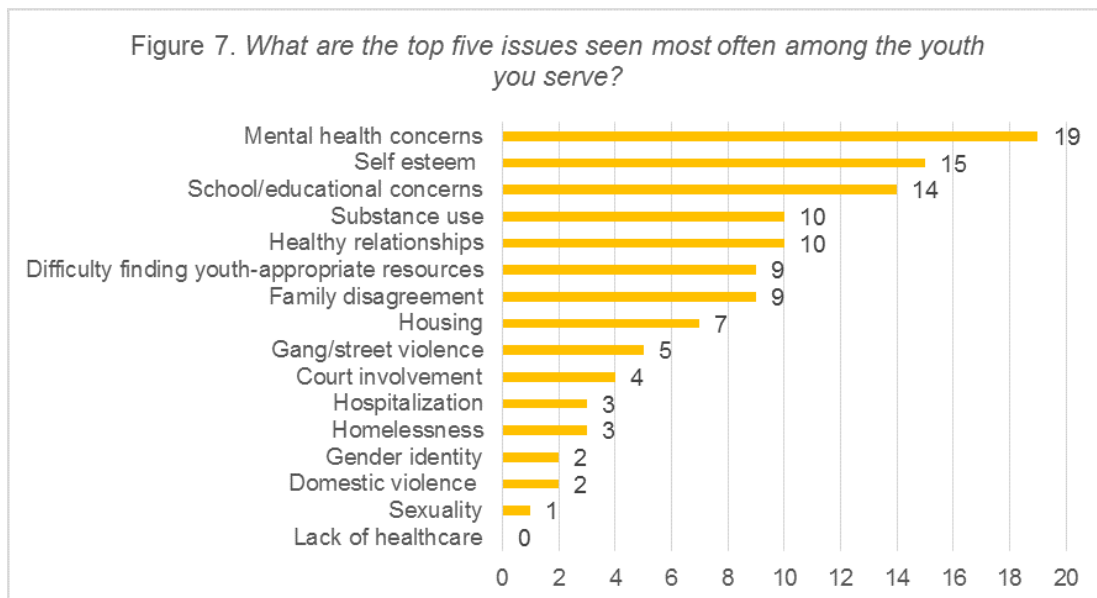
In contrast, while data entry and documentation was one of the duties YPAs performed most often, they did not receive much satisfaction in performing this duty and perceived it to offer little benefit to the communities they serve.

C. NEEDS OF YOUTH SERVED

When asked how often they worked with youth in different social service systems:

- 19 out of 24 YPAs reported always or often working with youth in mental health treatment.
- About half of YPAs surveyed, 13 out of 24, reported always or often working with youth in special education.
- About half of YPAs surveyed, 13 out of 24, reported often or sometimes working with youth in substance use treatment.

Most YPAs reported sometimes, rarely or never working with youth in probation, foster care or juvenile justice. YPAs were also asked to choose the top five issues the youth they serve experience. Figure 7. Issues listed in order of the number of times each was selected as a top issue:



RESULTS

PART II: JOB SATISFACTION

A. PERCEPTION OF IMPACT

Most YPAs surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed that they:

- Had the tools and resources needed to do their jobs well
- Were well-integrated into their agencies
- Could share opinions that were well-respected in professional settings
- Were treated as separate and equal members of the family support team*
- Had enough information about the issues faced by the youth they serve
- Felt prepared to help the youth they serve with the issues they face

The 24 YPAs who responded felt they had a positive impact on the communities they serve.

When asked to describe their impact on the community, steering youth toward resources and acting as role models emerged as consistent themes:

“I feel I’m able to have the adolescent youth hear my story and [they] feel better knowing that someone had a similar experience. It’s also nice to share resources and opportunities to youth who need that push.”

“I let it be known that where they are at isn’t the end and I show myself as an example.”

“I’ve been told by youth that I inspire them.”

When YPAs were asked to describe the most important thing they had learned in their role, patience and professional self-validation emerged as consistent themes:

“[I learned] to be patient and listen.”

“[I learned] that my voice matters. Although I am coaching youth on how to advocate for themselves, I have learned to advocate for myself as a professional.”

YPAs were asked to rate their satisfaction with five aspects of their jobs. Most YPAs reported being either very satisfied or satisfied with their:

- Job duties
- Training opportunities
- Work hours
- Coworkers

*The family support team varies by setting, but often includes a youth peer advocate working in tandem with a family peer advocate and, at times, a clinical partner.

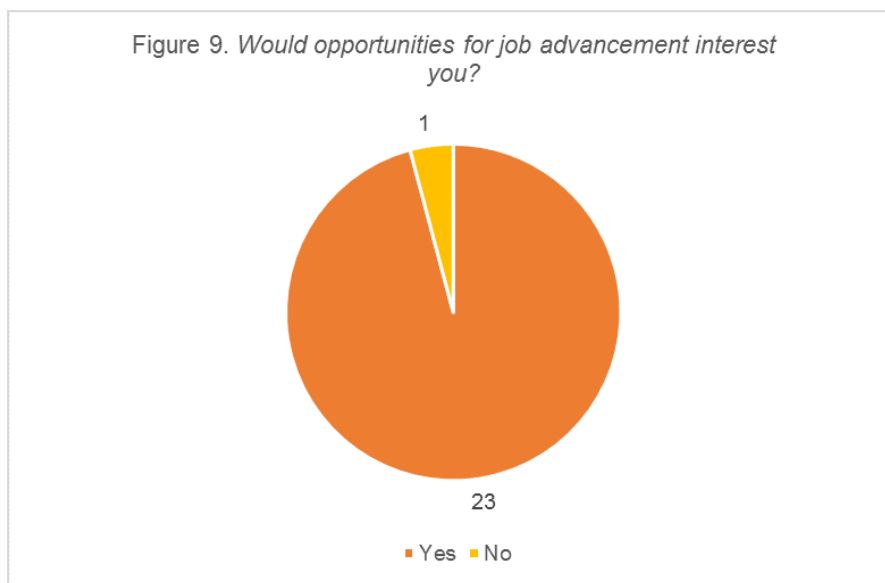


B. OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT

When asked about their satisfaction with opportunities for advancement in their positions:

- Eight YPAs were neutral
- Six were satisfied
- Four were dissatisfied
- Four were very dissatisfied
- Two were very satisfied

The majority of YPAs were interested in opportunities of job advancement. However, those opportunities do not currently exist.



YPAs were asked to describe the duties a senior-level YPA should have if the position were created. Providing supervision and training to newer YPAs and interfacing with broader systems were consistent themes that emerged:

- "Supervise and train other peer advocates and waiver providers ... conduct monthly trips [to] inform advocacy efforts for SED youth in educational settings"
- "Support other YAs within their organization, represent youth voice at public forums, i.e., [Borough Based Council] and Youth Power"

When asked to describe what skills or experiences a senior-level YPA should have, valuing experience and training were consistent themes:

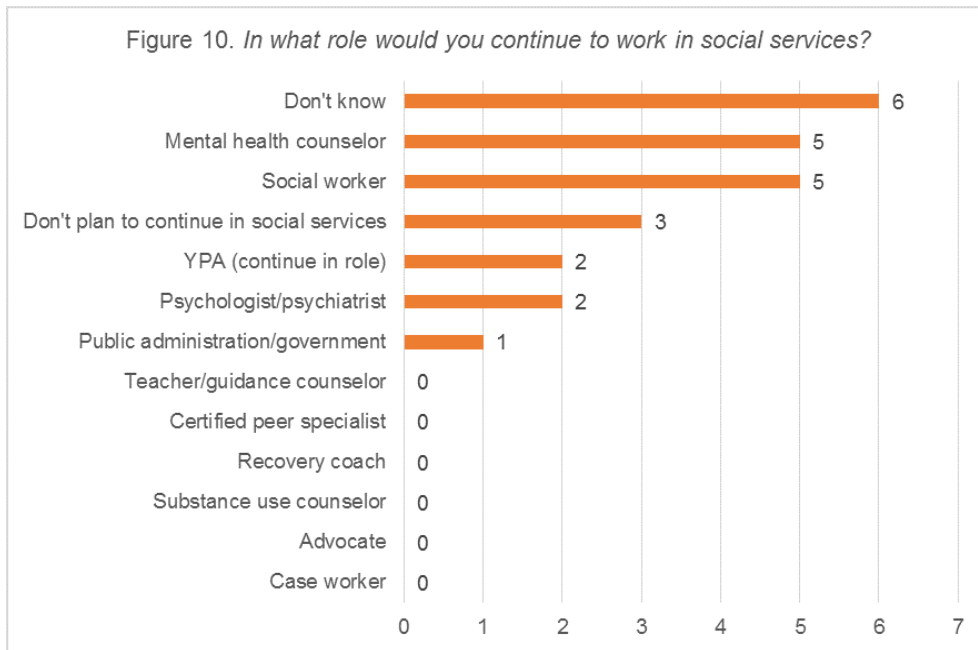
- At least five years' experience
- Suicide prevention training
- All possible trainings



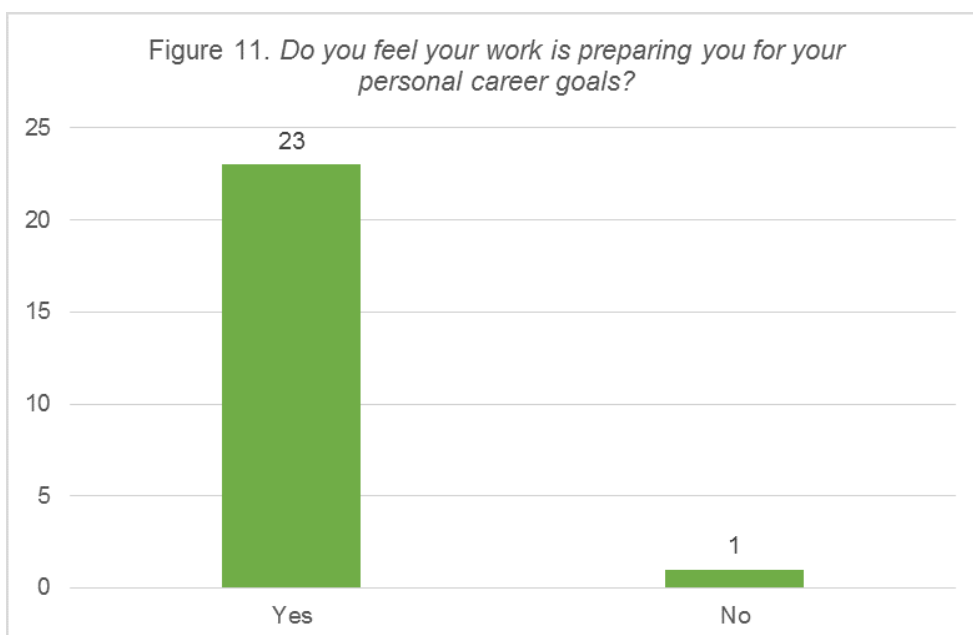
C. PERSONAL CAREER GOALS

YPAs were asked if they planned to continue to work in social services, and if so, in what role.

- A quarter of respondents, six out of 24, did not know if they would continue in social services.
- 14 respondents said they would continue to work in social services, mainly as mental health counselors or social workers.



The majority of YPAs felt their work prepared them for their personal career goals.



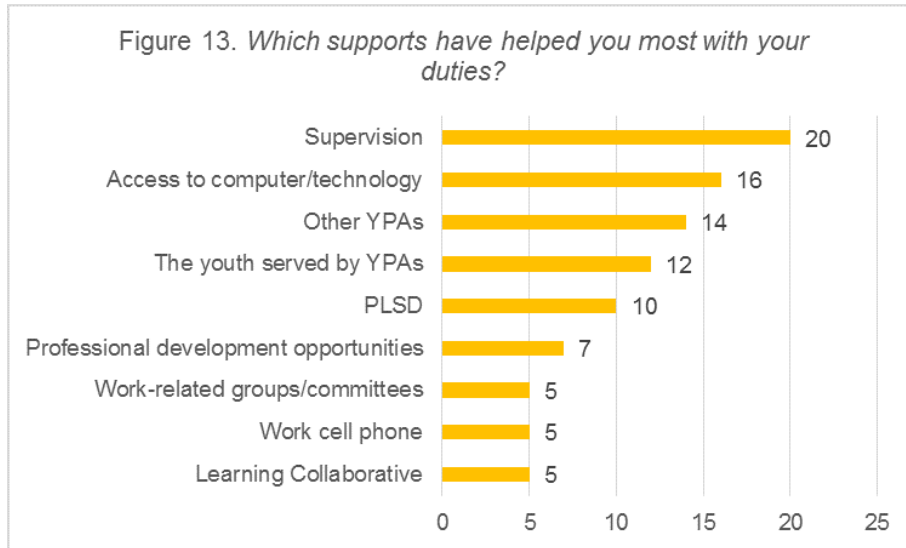
RESULTS

PART III: JOB SUPPORTS



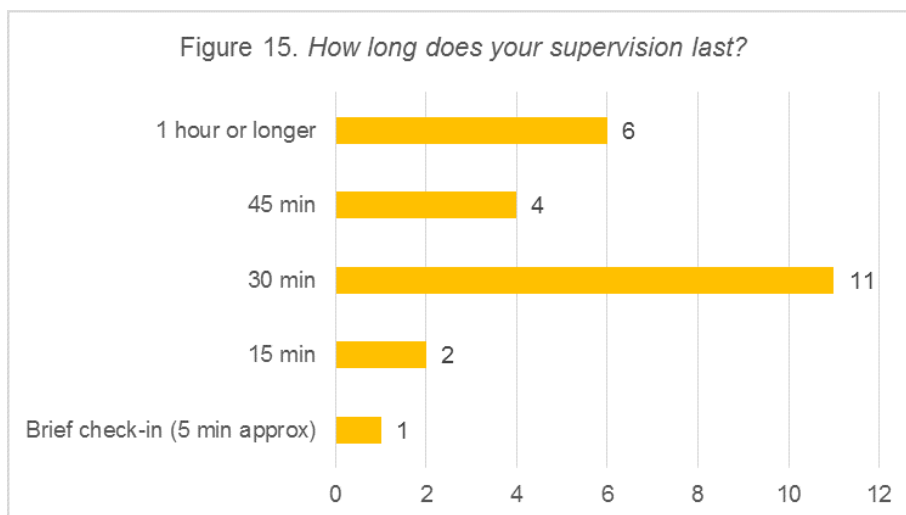
A. SUPERVISION

YPAs were asked to select from a list all of the supports that helped them with their duties. Supervision, selected by 20 YPAs, was the most frequently chosen response to this item. Figure 13. Supports listed in order of how often they were selected by YPAs as helpful:



Note: PLSD stands for Peer Leadership Support and Development, a monthly professional development group run by and for YPAs.

YPAs were asked how often they believed they should receive supervision, how often they do receive supervision and for how long. The majority of YPAs receive supervision one to two times per month (13 YPAs), some YPAs receive supervision once a week (8 YPAs) or multiple times a week (4 YPAs) and only one YPA reported receiving supervision less than once a month. These responses correlate with how often the YPAs believe they should receive supervision. The majority of supervision sessions last between 15 and 45 minutes (17 YPAs). Figure 15. Length of supervision sessions:



RESULTS



When asked what they valued most in these sessions YPAs said that:

- It offered a place to ask for help and problem-solve (17 YPAs).
- It helped them feel capable of performing their duties (16).
- It helped them do a better job (14).

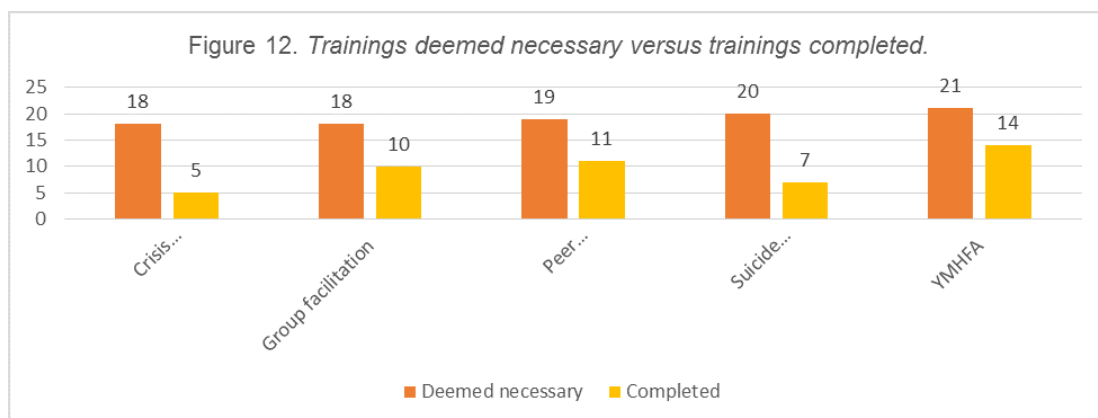
More than three quarters of YPAs surveyed, 19 out of 24, were very satisfied or satisfied with their supervision.

B. TRAINING

YPAs were asked which trainings were necessary for them to perform their job well. The top five training areas chosen were:

- Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA)
- Suicide prevention training
- Peer mentoring and support
- Group facilitation
- Crisis intervention and/or de-escalation

Few YPAs reported completing the five trainings they deemed necessary for them to perform their job well. YPAs said they did not complete these trainings because either their employers did not offer or promote them or because their non-traditional work hours and responsibilities could not always accommodate training schedules.



C. TECHNOLOGY

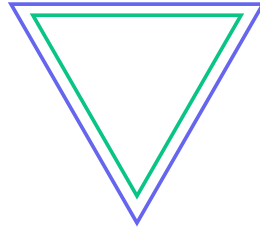
When asked to describe which technical supports would help them perform their duties, access to mobile technology was a common theme:

- “A working smart phone to communicate with teens.”
- “A better phone to reach out to youth.”
- “iPad and cell phone.”

YPAs were asked which of their job duties were difficult to perform without a cell phone:

- Conducting outreach, selected by 12 YPAs, was the most frequently chosen response to this item.
- Collaborating with family advocates was selected by 11 YPAs.
- Nine YPAs selected organizing social and recreational activities.

CONCLUSIONS



These survey results provide important insights into the lives and roles of YPAs at the NYC Health Department and OMH-funded agencies in New York City. Every YPA surveyed felt that they had a positive impact on the community they served and generally felt prepared and supported to help the youth in their care. They also felt satisfied with the supervision they received and that their jobs were preparing them for their own personal career goals. YPAs usually perform job duties they feel are aligned with youths' needs and what the YPAs find pleasure doing, namely, helping youth build self-advocacy, resilience and wellness skills. These skills are essential, as the majority of YPAs reported that they always or often work with youth in mental health treatment.

However, many YPAs felt they had little to no opportunities for job advancement. YPAs often leave the role due to this and/or concerns about pay. All but one YPA stated they would be interested in taking on higher level responsibilities if available to them, such as advancing into a senior YPA position. While YPAs were generally satisfied with the trainings they received, these trainings did not always align with what YPAs deemed necessary for the role. And, while the survey results show YPAs are largely happy with their supervisors, YPAs have also expressed that their jobs can lack structure and clarity, leading to role confusion and burnout. For additional information on YPA experiences, see the Addendum: Advocate Recommendations.

Recognizing the value of youth peer support services, multiple branches of the health care system, including Medicaid, are preparing to incorporate peer advocates into service delivery. As the peer workforce expands, guidance is needed to ensure that YPAs are effectively and thoughtfully integrated into these systems. This survey was planned and administered in preparation for this expansion with the intention of identifying the needs of current youth advocates working in the mental health system.

The survey administrators asked a group of NYC youth advocates to provide additional interpretation of the survey results based on the group members' experiences delivering youth peer services and/or supporting youth peer advocates. The group then authored recommendations for current and future YPA employers, government agencies and other stakeholders to best support this growing workforce. The recommendation authors used the survey results and information gathered during conversations and informal focus groups with YPAs to develop the recommendations. These recommendations address the most pressing and consistent needs for YPAs, the details of which are described in the Addendum: Advocate Recommendations.

ADDENDUM: ADVOCATE RECOMMENDATIONS

1

SET CLEAR WORKPLACE EXPECTATIONS



2

CREATE SHARED COMMITMENT



3

VALUE AND SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL GROWTH



4

COMMIT TO YOUTH-GUIDED PRACTICE AT ALL LEVELS



5

DEVELOP PATHS FOR RELEVANT CAREER ADVANCEMENT



6

PROVIDE COMPETITIVE COMPENSATION



7

CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF SUPPORT



8

ACCOMMODATE THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF PEER WORKERS
AND PROMOTE PERSONAL WELL-BEING



9

CREATE AND UPHOLD REASONABLE WORKING
CONDITIONS



10

LAUNCH AN NYC YPA COALITION TO COMMIT TO AND
IMPLEMENT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS



ADDENDUM: ADVOCATE RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING THE NYC YPA WORKFORCE

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A. ROLE OF THE YPA

Currently, a standard training, credential or job description for the role of YPA does not exist nor is there a requirement for employers to become competent in youth-guided practice.* Consequently, job duties for YPAs vary widely by hiring agency, which can lead to confusion in roles among sites and agencies. We recommend that agencies who employ YPAs consider the following actions:

1. SET CLEAR WORKPLACE EXPECTATIONS.

Many YPAs are just beginning their professional careers and therefore may need more than a broad orientation to their work setting. Equally important, agencies should also provide YPAs with a comprehensive, standardized, and thoughtful orientation to their specific role within the first 30 days of hire. This should include the following topics:

- The unique purpose of the YPA role within the broader program and/or agency
- Job duties and expectations
- Clarity on boundaries and appropriate workplace relationships with both clients and colleagues
- Information about resources within both the hiring agency and outside resources that could be of assistance to new hires, as well as details on how to access the resources.

In addition to an in-person orientation, agencies are encouraged to develop, provide and annually update either an employee manual for YPAs or a comprehensive insert with information specific to YPAs in an existing manual.

We recommend this [Transitions RTC toolkit](#) to employers to help them through this process.

*Youth M.O.V.E National defines youth-guided organizations as places that “create safe environments that enable young people to gain self-sustainability in accordance with the cultures and beliefs with which they identify. Further, a youth guided approach recognizes that there is a continuum of power that should be shared with young people based on their understanding and maturity in a strength-based change process. Youth guided organizations recognize that this process should be fun and worthwhile.” youthmovenational.org/peersupport.

ADDENDUM: ADVOCATE RECOMMENDATIONS

2. CREATE SHARED COMMITMENT.

Most YPAs surveyed say they are well-integrated into their agencies, and are treated as equals to their colleagues. Despite this, YPAs sometimes feel they are held to lower professional standards than their non-YPA colleagues. To ensure that all YPAs feel respected and appropriately challenged in their roles, agencies should create and promote the conditions that allow for and encourage YPA excellence. Therefore, we recommend that YPAs and their supervisors sign an agreement that outlines the YPA's professional standards and tasks. The agreement should acknowledge a shared understanding of the YPA's work and the organization's overall responsibility to appropriately support and uphold that work.

3. VALUE AND SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL GROWTH.

We acknowledge the efforts made by many YPA employers to provide training opportunities that are beneficial to YPAs. However, the survey results show that not all YPAs receive the trainings they deem necessary for them to perform their job well. We believe that career development and training are essential components of the YPA role, as they are with any skilled position. Accordingly, employers must discuss training opportunities at orientation and supervisors of YPAs should regularly encourage YPAs to take advantage of professional development opportunities available to them. Employers should offer and encourage training regularly to YPAs throughout their tenure. All trainings should be accessible to YPAs based on their schedule, available during work hours and, most importantly, specific to YPA job duties and needs. It is also important to note that, in the survey, many YPAs expressed a desire to continue their career in the mental health field. There is a strong benefit to offering supplemental trainings and professional development opportunities that allow YPAs to expand their skill set and knowledge base in a way that will enhance their abilities not just as YPAs but also as future mental health professionals and social workers. We recommend that all YPAs at minimum receive comprehensive training in the following five areas, which they deemed necessary in the survey:

- Youth Mental Health First Aid
- Suicide prevention training
- Peer mentoring and support
- Group facilitation
- Crisis intervention and/or de-escalation

Finally, we strongly recommend that employers consider the Peer Leadership Support and Development (PLSD) group essential professional development for YPAs. PLSD is a monthly skills-development group created for and by YPAs. The group provides training and support around core job competencies, leadership skills and professional development.

ADDENDUM: ADVOCATE RECOMMENDATIONS

B. JOB SATISFACTION

The majority of YPAs surveyed reported that they are generally satisfied with their jobs. Based on our follow-up discussions with YPAs, we learned that this is primarily due to the passion they have for their role and the satisfaction they derive from engaging with the young people in their care. We believe that certain systemic changes must still occur for YPAs to feel truly satisfied in all areas of their jobs, beyond their interactions with youth.

1. COMMIT TO YOUTH-GUIDED PRACTICE AT ALL LEVELS.

Any agency that currently employs YPAs, or will, should self-assess their competency in and adherence to youth-guided practice and use the results to address limitations and improve practices. Additionally, the organizations that govern or contract with YPA employers should use the principles of youth-guided practice to evaluate proposals to hire YPAs and in performance evaluations.

Competency in youth-guided practice is of particular importance for staff who directly supervise YPAs. We recommend all supervisors become well-acquainted with the role and challenges of a YPA before beginning supervision. Supervisors can meet this requirement if they have lived experience in the child-serving systems, have worked as a youth advocate in the past, and/or have completed comprehensive staff training. We recommend YOUTH POWER's comprehensive ["The How To's of Youth Guided Practice."](#)

2. DEVELOP PATHS FOR RELEVANT CAREER ADVANCEMENT.

YPAs feel there is little to no opportunity for career growth in their current roles. Many view their roles as short-term positions rather than long-term professional commitments, regardless of the enjoyment and satisfaction they may derive from their work. Employers and funders should strongly consider developing and funding senior YPA positions to support the workforce in a more meaningful and sustainable manner. As suggested in survey responses, senior YPAs could supervise newly hired YPAs, develop group curricula and help form and strengthen long-term community partnerships. We firmly believe that providing opportunities for professional development and job advancement will help employers develop and retain talented YPAs, while also preparing them for future careers in the mental health field, which the survey suggests is of interest to many. In turn, lower turnover will ultimately create stronger relationships with, and improved outcomes for, youth served.

3. PROVIDE COMPETITIVE COMPENSATION.

Most YPAs stated in the survey that they do not feel adequately compensated for their work. In our follow-up and supplemental conversations, many more YPAs cited pay as a critical barrier to staying in the YPA role and that they often leave for better paying jobs in

ADDENDUM: ADVOCATE RECOMMENDATIONS

other industries, such as food or retail. Combined with lack of career advancement, low compensation is among the top reasons that YPAs vacate their positions. Pay rates in the human services sector are typically modest. Nonetheless, current pay rates do not reflect the skilled work, unique qualifications and irreplaceable value of YPAs. Given that low salaries remain a barrier to the sustainability and the success of the YPA workforce, we urge a broader discussion about salary increases for YPAs amongst payers, governmental bodies and all relevant stakeholders.

C. JOB SUPPORTS

As with any skilled position, YPAs need the right kind of ongoing support to effectively serve young people. YPAs are capable of achieving excellence in their work and should be held to such a standard. In turn, agencies should create and sustain the conditions that allow for and encourage this ideal.

1. CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF SUPPORT.

Employers should actively cultivate a workplace climate that promotes wellness-driven programs and initiatives for all staff, such as periodical staff retreats and other opportunities to recharge and receive support when needed. Given the high rates of turnover and burnout among direct service workers, genuinely supportive work environments are essential to improving morale and decreasing attrition. This is of particular importance for YPAs, many of whom are at the beginning of their careers and who may have pre-existing mental health needs.

2. ACCOMMODATE THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF PEER WORKERS AND PROMOTE PERSONAL GROWTH AND WELL-BEING.

Role modeling emerged in the survey as a consistently valued practice that YPAs do to support the youth they serve. Frequently presenting oneself as an example, and sharing personal stories, are extremely inspirational and essential to the work of YPAs; however, these practices can take a toll on YPAs.

During the orientation process, YPAs should be made fully aware that due to the peer-to-peer nature of their work, personal vulnerabilities may surface while on the job. YPAs must be fully informed of and equipped to handle this possibility. Supervisors should know how to support YPAs in their professional journey as a peer, which includes the process of disclosing personal experiences with the youth they serve.

Lastly, employers should provide opportunities for YPAs to reflect periodically on their own wellness and recovery, given the personal and often emotional nature of their work. This can be completed formally through structured self-assessments and/or informally through check-ins. With the majority of YPAs responding in the survey that they are

ADDENDUM: ADVOCATE RECOMMENDATIONS

satisfied, or very satisfied, with their supervision, which offers them a place to ask for help and problem solve, we believe supervision is the ideal place to cultivate these conversations. Supervisors should be trained and supported by their organizations in doing this effectively.

3. CREATE AND UPHOLD REASONABLE WORKING CONDITIONS.

Although not fully described in the survey results, some YPAs have expressed that they often “take work home” – literally and figuratively. While this can be addressed in some part through ongoing trainings around boundaries and self-care management, we believe additional supports are needed.

First, all YPAs should have duties that are “right-sized” to their role. This means that the ratio and amount of their caseloads, group-work, community outreach and other responsibilities should be appropriate and manageable, respective to their full- or part-time status. Second, employers should not expect YPAs to complete work on a regular basis that exceeds or is clearly outside the bounds of their job descriptions (e.g., clinical work or administrative support for other colleagues). YPAs should be consulted and their experiences taken into consideration as the criteria for billing these services are developed by New York State.

Third, due to the nature of the work of YPAs, youth and their families often need to be in touch, especially when YPAs are in the field. As indicated in the survey results, access to mobile technology emerged as a unifying theme when asked to describe what technical supports would help YPAs perform their duties. We strongly recommend that mobile technology be available to all YPAs to support them in managing their work in an efficient and modern manner.

Our final recommendation, which would address the duties, support and job satisfaction of the YPA workforce, is to [LAUNCH AN NYC YPA COALITION TO COMMIT TO AND IMPLEMENT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS.](#)

We believe a coalition, made up of government agencies, provider and advocacy organizations, funders and youth peer advocates, working together towards common goals, will help to create shared power, responsibility and accountability as the YPA workforce grows in New York City. As a coalition, this youth-guided group would expand the understanding, accessibility and impact of youth peer advocacy across child-serving systems, using both experiential and evidence-based approaches to improve outcomes for all youth.

ADDENDUM: ADVOCATE RECOMMENDATIONS

METHODS USED TO OBTAIN ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK AND SEEK CLARIFICATION FROM YPAs ON SURVEY TOPICS

The recommendations authors had several opportunities throughout 2017 to hear directly from NYC YPAs about their role. The feedback they collected provided essential additional context to the survey results and were used to contextualize many of the recommendations in this report. Below is the list of these opportunities along with the number of YPAs present at each.

Site visits completed in 2017:

- Nine site visits to DOHMH contracted programs (20 YPAs)

Roundtable discussion with DOHMH Assistant Commissioner for Children, Youth, and Families:

- Fifteen YPAs present

University of Youth Power (UYP):

- UYP is a for-youth-by-youth social justice conference convened by YOUTH POWER!. Thirty NYC YPAs attended the UYP conference in June, 2017.

Peer Leadership Support and Development Group "PLSD" (held the first Friday of each month; 12 held in 2017):

- January (15 YPAs)
- February (14 YPAs)
- March (15 YPAs)
- April (13 YPAs)
- May (14 YPAs)
- June (13 YPAs)
- July (8 YPAs)
- August (8 YPAs)
- September (12 YPAs)
- October (9 YPAs)
- November (6 YPAs)
- December (8 YPAs)

PLSD sponsored YPA professional development trainings:

- The NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) training part I (7 YPAs)
- OCFS training part II (14 YPAs)
- DOHMH substance use training (11 YPAs)
- Workplace boundaries training (11 YPAs)
- Medicaid redesign training (18 YPAs)
- OMH trauma-informed training (10 YPAs)

ADDENDUM: ADVOCATE RECOMMENDATIONS

METHODS USED TO OBTAIN ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK AND SEEK CLARIFICATION FROM YPAs ON SURVEY TOPICS

Informal discussion groups:

- Group 1 (4 YPAs)
- Group 2 (4 YPAs)
- Group 3 (6 YPAs)
- Group 4 (5 YPAs)
- Group 5 (8 YPAs)
- Group 6 (5 YPAs)

Discussion groups at conferences:

- Mental Health America National Conference 2017 (5 YPAs)
- NYC Trauma Informed Care Conference (14 YPAs)

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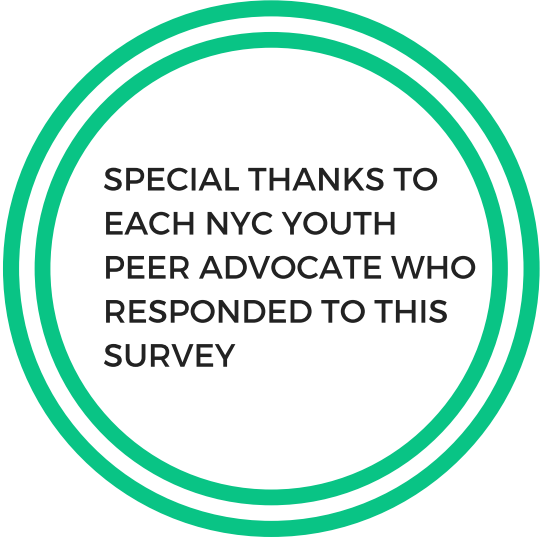
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SPECIAL THANKS TO
EACH NYC YOUTH
PEER ADVOCATE WHO
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SURVEY