MCH Innovations Database
Practice Summary & Implementation Guidance

Near Peer Hiring Toolkit

The Near Peer hiring toolkit provides a comprehensive guide to hiring young adults close in age to youth served by your agency, improving relationships, strategies, and overall impact of youth-facing programs.

| Cutting-Edge | Emerging | Promising | Best |

Location	Topic Area	Setting
Texas	Equity and Antiracism, Family and Youth Engagement, Workforce Development	Workplace

Population Focus	NPM	Date Added
Adolescents and Young Adults	NA	October 2023

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PRACTICE DESCRIPTION

Hiring near peers, or young people who are close in age but older than your target youth population, builds an essential bridge between those you serve and the people serving them. Near peers inform the work done by the agency, they institutionalize youth voice and represent young people in staff settings, and they help translate across generational gaps. While they are an incredible asset, hiring part-time youth staff represents unique organizational challenges for agencies that typically hire only full-time staff or adult staff. Near peers are often college students or college-aged youth who have many demands on their time, requiring unique supervision and management processes. Additionally, HR departments can be unprepared to hire this unique type of position and may perceive risk in hiring youth. Our toolkit demonstrates strategies that support the near peer themselves, the staff that supervise and work with them, and adapting the agency policies that impact them.

The key population impacted is young adults – this toolkit creates an employment opportunity for them. Secondarily, it benefits youth in youth-facing programming, and the staff/agency that delivers that programming.

Our agency, Healthy Futures of Texas, developed this model in partnership with the Texas Youth Action Network, a program of Texas A&M University funded by the Texas Department of State Heath Services. We completed an initial qualitative evaluation of the program and how it impacted the near peer we hired, the staff who engaged that near peer, and the youth involved in our program.

CORE COMPONENTS & PRACTICE ACTIVITES

1) Preparing to hire a near peer
2) Supervising a near peer
3) Offboarding a near peer at the end of their employment

Core Components & Practice Activities		
Core Component	**Activities**	**Operational Details**
Preparing to hire a near peer	Step 1: Meet with HR personnel to determine all the steps needed to hire staff at your agency Step 2: Examine agency policies to make sure they're teen/youth friendly Step 3: Create a welcome gift for the near peer Step 4: Build an onboarding schedule	Takes 3 months on average Note: For this and the other two components, more specific instructions are given with each step. See the Recipe Book.

Supervising a near pear	Step 1: Consider all the things you need to communicate to a near peer Step 2: Develop SMART goals Step 3: Weekly supervision Step 4: Targeted professional development Step 5: Be flexible	The positions usually last ~2 years, which we've found to be a productive time to get people successfully situated but also allow them to experience other opportunities at this age. It also allows for a cycle where new near peers can be added to bring more youth into the work the agency does.
Offboarding a near peer at the end of their employment	Step 1: Resumes and cover letter support Step 2: References Step 3: Mentorship Step 4: Thank them	This process should begin one month before the end of their employment

HEALTH EQUITY

Young people face unique challenges in adultism, which can be briefly defined as the idea that they cannot and should not make decisions for their own lives. Adultism enhances other types of oppression, like racism, misogyny, and heteronormativity, and it reinforces respectability politics. All of these forces limit opportunity, cause harm, and minimize chances for success.
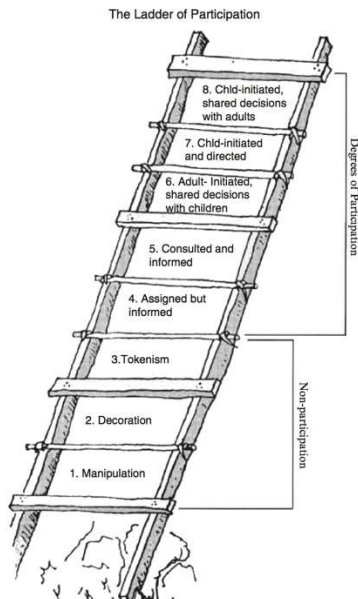
The near peer position, when successfully implemented, does not tokenize a young person. Rather, it provides new access to spaces previously reserved for adults, like budget and staff meetings, and provides consistent opportunities for youth voice to be incorporated in a wide range of decision making. Young people should not be resigned to making TikToks as the only avenue of their voice being heard. They are interested in – and most importantly, impacted by – all of the cogs in the machine of the agencies that serve them. They deserve to see how decisions are made, to influence and make decisions, and to hold the agency accountable for its decisions.

In the same way that adultism enhances other forms of oppression, meaningfully empowering youth within an agency's staff structure enhances equity initiatives. For example, younger generations are often able to help advocate for agency-wide change related to larger social movements, like anti-racist revisions of dress code policies and more affirming and productive time off policies.

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

Our practice is deeply rooted in positive youth development strategies, especially the 5 Cs (competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring), as well as Hart's Ladder of Participation and the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation.

The Ladder of Participation

Source: https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-childrens-participation/

Source: IAP2

We took this approach because, as our youth program entered its 7th year, we felt the need to complete a revisioning of the structure that served our program to ensure it was meaningfully youth-centered and well managed. The development of this toolkit coincided with a revision and strategic planning of our program, which has been successful in the years since. The near peer model has become a core element of youth-facing programs, and it has helped to ensure youth voice is a cornerstone element of our agency's work overall. Evaluation was initially completed by interviewing our pilot near peer and the staff who worked alongside them. This was completed by the Texas Youth Action Network (TYAN).

The TYAN program supported the Team Lead pilot at Healthy Futures for approximately 1 year, including a qualitative analysis focused on understanding how the Team Lead position functioned within the existing Healthy Futures Youth Adult Partnership (YAP). TYAN aimed to document both the Team Lead and the supervisor/mentor experiences to provide guidance to other organizations interested in incorporating a similar role into their work with youth.

We conducted 3 interviews with the Team Lead and 3 interviews with the supervisor/mentor each for approximately 40 minutes. These interviews were conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the YAP year (September 2020, February 2021, May 2021, respectively). We also observed a virtual YAP meeting In February 2021 where we made note of the interactions between the Team Lead and the YAP, to triangulate the data from the interviews.

For the first interview, questions for both the supervisor and Team Lead focused on better understanding the "why" of including this role in their YAP and what the expectations were for this role. The second and third interviews included the following questions below.

Questions for adult staff:

- Open up conversation- general updates on the Team Lead position?
- Now that it has been a few months, have your goals/expectations for the Team Lead changed at all?
- How has the addition of the Team Lead changed your day-to-day work? How has Team Lead affected the operations of your organization as a whole?
- How has the addition of Team Lead affected other youth members? Can you talk more about the relationship between the Team Lead and the other youth?
- How do meetings usually go? How is planning/decision making usually handled?
- How is the Team Lead position helping to promote more effective positive youth development strategies in your organization?
- What other life/career skills do you think the Team Lead is learning from this experience?
- What resources/skills/knowledge/support did you need in implementing this new position? Do you anticipate any future needs/struggles?
- What advice would you give to other organizations who want to do this?

Questions for youth Team Leads:

- General updates?
- Can you tell me more about your relationship/the dynamic with the other youth?
- What about your relationship with adults in the organization?
- Is the job what you expected so far? Have your expectations/goals for the job changed?
- Tell me about some successes and/or challenges you've experienced so far as the Team Lead.
- What have you learned so far? Skills?
- How do you see what you've learned so far helping you in the future/ with career?
- Any resources/skills/knowledge/ support you need as you continue as the Team Lead?
- What advice would you give to a future Team Lead?

Interviews were transcribed and will be analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Evaluation now follows along traditional staff management evaluation, including annual SMART goals, employee performance reviews, and reviews of the supervisor's performance. We also track the impact of the near peer on deliverables they help to reach.

Here are some quotes from folks involved in the Team Lead project:

"The Team Lead position has increased rapport between both ends of the team. Having a Team Lead has led to the youth of this year's cohort to express feeling heard and appreciated throughout their participation."

"What we love about the team lead concept is that it can have a positive impact on many people. The YAC alum turned lead gets hands-on experience with organizing, communicating, and facilitating meetings in a professional setting. Organizational staff work with youth as a peer and can rely on their input in a way they may never have otherwise. The youth in the YAC can relate to the team lead and may even see themselves taking on the role someday. Each promotes positive youth development for adolescents."

"A best practice in this work is to have a healthy ratio of young people to mentors. With one dedicated staff person, there was a limited ratio. Adding in our Team Lead has been a major boost there. This means more time to reach out one-on-one with youth."

COLLABORATORS AND PARTNERS

This program would not have been possible without the funding, training, and support provided by the Texas Youth Action Network. Together, the near peer role was envisioned, piloted, and evaluated.

We also needed to recruit young people from our programs to serve in the pilot near peer role, and we worked within our agency staff to build buy in for this experimental role.

Practice Collaborators and Partners			
Partner/ Collaborator	How are they involved in decision-making throughout practice processes?	How are you partnering with this group?	Does this stakeholder have lived experience/come from a community impacted by the practice?
Texas Youth Action Network	Helped conceptualize this model, helped build the toolkit, and completed initial evaluations of its implementation	We continue to share this model alongside them (for example, we presented on this at AMCHP 2023)	Not directly, but TYAN works with a wide range of positive youth development programs, so they have a unique view of the challenges that agencies face in this area.
Young adults	Hired into the role, then participate in all the activities described above	Young people become a part of all staff functions	Yes, they are still experiencing what it means to be a young person, and they help translate this lived experience into effective agency policies and programs
Agency staff	Work alongside near peer	Consistently engage with the near pear	No, and this is why we need the near peer. While everyone was a young person once, they are not a young person today. This is why we need the near peer's perspective.

REPLICATION

This role was replicated at a division of the City of San Antonio called Project Worth. Project Worth provides programming to Youth Ambassadors. These Ambassadors work on adolescent health initiatives across San Antonio, especially those related to mental health. To replicate the role, Project Worth had to work within city bureaucracy, which took longer and required more negotiation with various HR professionals. Ultimately, the Project Worth staff was able to identify a path forward by utilizing existing part time roles as examples and by approaching the process with patience. Ultimately, the City was very supportive of their introduction of a near peer role. The City of San Antonio and Healthy Futures of Texas put on a press conference to promote the strategy for other area organizations.

INTERNAL CAPACITY

Personnel required:
- Program directors over youth-facing programs needed to support the process, approve the budget line items, and provide scaffolding for the supervision of this role.
- Program coordinators needed to be able to support the near peer role, which required both time and training.
- HR professionals needed to be engaged from conception of the role through offboarding of the near peer to ensure we were compliant with all necessary policies
- Executive/C-Suite leadership was involved as part of the approval process

For future implementers of this program, we recommend considering who at your organization has influence and power of hiring structures and identifying the best allies for youth empowerment. These people are often the best people to approach first because they can help you navigate structures within the organization that you may or may not be aware of. In the best-case scenarios, we recommend also considering who the highest ranking allies for youth empowerment are. At Healthy Futures of Texas, our CEO was friendly to the idea early on, which helped pave the way for a strong institutional commitment to the role.

PRACTICE TIMELINE

The following timeline should be adjusted timewise to align with the pace at which your organization's internal procedures move. Times needed are estimated based on experiences at Healthy Futures of Texas, a medium-size nonprofit.

Phase: Planning/Pre-Implementation		
Activity Description	**Time Needed**	**Responsible Party**
Step 1: Meet with your HR personnel to determine all the steps needed to hire staff at your agency	1 week	Program director over youth program, HR staff

• Discuss hiring, background check, drug screening, and reference check procedures • Determine if your agency already has part-time employees, and how they differ from full-time employees • Explain the importance of the new position to your HR personnel so they have more context for why they're doing new work • Ask the HR personnel how they could make their process more teen-friendly • This can include more specific directions, simplifying the screening process, and building new onboarding procedures around part-time work		

Step 2: Examine your agency policies to make sure they're teen friendly
 	
• Look through your staff handbook and highlight any places where you may need to explain more or change policy
   • For many part-time near-peers, this may be their first time in an office environment
• Be prepared to discuss the dress code, timeliness, and other important information related to professional success
   • Are there any pieces that need changing?
   • For example, how will your organization approach holidays for part-time staff?
	1 week to review
	
	1 to 2 months to revise
		Program director, relevant organizational leadership, HR staff

Step 3: Make Welcome Gift for your near-peer • A welcome gift is critical for making sure they feel like they're a part of your team • Include all the items relevant to their role, like laptops, tape, scissors and staplers • Include agency information, like one-pagers, postcards, and curriculum • Include swag from your agency - t-shirts, buttons, water bottles, everything!	1 day	Program director and program coordinator over youth program
Step 4: Build your onboarding schedule Plan to include the following items in the schedule	1 week	Program director and program coordinator over youth program

- Daily meetings with their supervisor for the first couple of shifts - this helps to keep the near-peer centered and on tasks
- SMART goals or other goals shaping activities
- Introductions to the rest of the staff where they can learn more about the rest of the agency and meet their coworkers
- Invitations to ongoing staff, department or other meetings
- Weekly supervision times

Phase: Implementation		
Activity Description	**Time Needed**	**Responsible Party**
Step 1: Consider all the things you'll need to communicate to your near-peer • Communicate the difference between part-time and full-time staff expectations • Communicate specific tasks and schedules for their work • Highlight major deadlines and deliverables • Communicate appropriate communication with young people and adults - they'll likely not have had experience with working with high schoolers in a professional setting, so make sure they understand relevant boundaries	1 week	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer
Step 2: Develop SMART goals • Check in on these halfway through the year, and at the end of year • Use them to cover long-term goals both for the projects they work on and for their professional development	1 week, then check ins regularly throughout employment	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer
Step 3: Weekly supervision • Do a check-in • It's easy! Just ask "How are you doing?"	Weekly	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer

Activity Description	Time Needed	Responsible Party
• Utilize this time for task management • Building a regular schedule builds reliability and lessens the need for putting out fires that arise due to lack of attention • Ask about their career and life goals and help them meet them • Solicit feedback for yourself		
Step 4: Targeted professional development • Consider: What does your TL need to be successful? Where are they in their professional trajectory? • Find tools they can use to meet those goals • Discuss parts of the nonprofit world they're interested in	As needed	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer
Step 5: Be flexible • Semesters change, life changes, work changes - be prepared to shift hours, workloads, and expectations • Yes, our deliverables are important - remember that your staff is the most important resource you have, though!	Used throughout relationship	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer

Phase: Sustainability/Offboarding

Activity Description	Time Needed	Responsible Party
Step 1: Resumes and cover letters are complex, strange documents that need to be explained in order for a person to be really successful when using them • Take some time to review a draft cover letter and the near peer's resume • Show your resume, too!	1 week	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer
Step 2: References • Let them know if you feel comfortable being a reference for them	1 day	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer

• Explain how to ask you for a reference		
Step 3: Mentorship • Explore opportunities to stay in touch, or to put them in touch with someone else who can continue as a mentor	1 day	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer
Step 4: Thank them • Show them specific examples of what they did to make your agency better • Speak from the heart • Give them a meaningful gift	1 day	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer
Step 5: Recruit your new near peer • Begin at the beginning!	As needed	Program director, program coordinator, and near peer

PRACTICE COST

Compared to other staff costs in nonprofit and government organizations, the near peer role represents a relatively affordable way to boost staff capacity, which is especially important when engaging in positive youth development strategies and maintaining a positive adult-to-youth ratio. Costs are estimated. Organizations that adopt this model are encouraged to pay at least $15/hour to ensure this role can provide meaningful benefit to the near peer.

Budget			
Activity/Item	**Brief Description**	**Quantity**	**Total**
Near peer pay	$15/hour	12 hours/week ~50 weeks/year (not including major holiday weeks)	$9,000
Fringe costs	Usually low, related to payroll tax	Estimated at 5% of overall salary	$450

Chromebook	For use to complete work – though many college students have a working computer for school	1 per near peer	$300
Supplies	Welcome gift and other supplies needed to complete role	$50 for welcome gift $50 for goodbye gift $200 for other costs	$300
Travel	Varies depending on agency policies and whether certain costs like mileage to the office are reimbursed	TBD	TBD
Professional development	Involving near peer in conferences, staff events, etc. Note: this is optional and can be cut depending on budget in favor of less expensive options, like books and webinars	Average conference cost could be around $1,500 including travel, hotel, registration etc.	$1,500
		Total Amount:	**$11,150**

LESSONS LEARNED

We would like to build out this element more fully and to use scaling as an opportunity to continue to identify new lessons for new types of agencies that hire near peers. It takes time, but it's possible. Executive buy-in and youth buy-in are both essential. Also, part time staff can be an affordable way to boost capacity.

HR staff can perceive this position as a high risk due to the relative inexperience of these people in the workplace, and this has sometimes emerged as an actual challenge. But it can be addressed with proactive supervision, a growth mindset, and consistent and targeted professional development.

NEXT STEPS

We will continue to share this toolkit. We will also continue to keep near peers on staff.

We would like to evaluate this further. We would also like to evaluate this from the perspective that often it is alumni of our programs who apply for this role. What impact does this have on the overall efficacy of our programs that we are not capturing?

RESOURCES PROVIDED

- Near peer tool kit, created in collaboration with the Texas Youth Action Network

- Blog regarding initial qualitative evaluation of role