I’m very pleased to announce that the first Youth Peer Support pilot training has been completed, and there are now five brave and compassionate individuals providing the service for the first time in Michigan. What a momentous event! I feel so overwhelmingly grateful for the opportunity to be a part of the development of this new service that will positively affect outcomes for youth involved in the Pre-Paid Inpatient Health Plan/Community Mental Health Service Provider system.

My journey into peer support began when I became a Certified Peer Support Specialist. It was a very gratifying work, but I’m in my early twenties, and there was a large age gap between myself and the peers I supported that oftentimes couldn’t be ignored. I was able to forge supportive relationships with those peers that were older, but I couldn’t help but think how being a peer could be beneficial to younger individuals.

After all, I was a youth when my mental health symptoms first presented themselves, which began my foray into the mental health system. Being diagnosed with a gamut of mental health disorders including Bipolar and Generalize Anxiety Disorder, I felt that no one could possibly understand the pain that I went through on a daily basis. I didn’t have anyone to talk to – not even my few friends in school could understand why everyday life was difficult for me. If I just had one person who could listen and really hear me… it could have made all the difference in my journey to building tools of resilience.

Around the very same time that I began considering how peer support could be great for youth, I noticed a job posting for a Youth Peer Support lead trainer through Association for Children’s Mental Health. I couldn’t believe it! *Youth Peer Support!* It was exactly what I wanted to do. I had to apply. Thankfully, I got the job, and while it has been hard work, it really has been a dream. I can actually help implement a service that will support youth that are where I was back then!

There is such a great need for Youth Peer Support. The service can provide better outcomes for youth, increased engagement in services, more interest in building resiliency skills, including system navigation, self-care, and self-advocacy tools, all of which are preventative of worsening symptoms. I think that if I had a Youth Peer Support Specialist, I’d have been able to start getting better, quicker. Not only can Youth Peer Support be supportive of youth, but also families, communities, and systems in so many ways. It is likely the Youth Peer Support Specialists will see some benefits from providing the services too!

Youth Peer Support is state plan service defined in the Michigan Medicaid Manual and is provided through the Pre-Paid Inpatient Health Plan/Community Mental Health Service Provider system by individuals that are between the ages of 18 and 26, and have experience receiving mental health services. Youth Peer Support Specialists have an integral place among the treatment team. I look forward to growing the number of Youth Peer Support Specialists throughout the state, and watching Michigan youth flourish.

Along with Youth Peer Support, we wanted to include a place for youth to go when they are looking for a peer experience online – thus we have created the Youth Page, right here on ACMH’s website. We’ve included some great features to this page: the graffiti wall: a place where youth from throughout their space can submit their artistic expression through any medium they prefer, an “ask the expert” section for youth with questions about resilience, and a plethora of links and videos from people that inspire us to keep going. Please take a moment to check out our youth page and share it with those you think might be interested!

- Sara Reynolds, Youth Peer Support Lead Trainer