

# Hiring a Parent Support Partner or Youth Peer Support Specialist

## Lived Experience is Essential

This document frequently refers to people with lived experience; in this context it means young adults living with mental health conditions (YPS) and parents/guardians who have or are currently parenting a child with an intellectual/developmental disability or mental health challenge (PSP) and all that these experiences entail. Lived Experience is an essential requirement for a Parent Support Partner (PSP) or Youth Peer Support Specialist (YPSS). PSPs/YPSSs tap into their lived experiences and apply what they have learned in life to the peer support relationship.

Lived experience needs to be quantified by more than a self-report check box in the application process. In hiring PSPs/YPSSs, the evidence of the skills developed through life experience needs to be sought out. Also, there must be an ability for the individual to self identify that they're in a place in their journey where they can use their lived experience in a more generalized manner to inform their work in supporting others. Not everyone with lived experience will be a good candidate for PSP or YPS work. Think about what lived experience looks like when it is brought to the table as a skill set.

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) guidelines allow employers to refer to psychiatric disability within a job description and posting if having had this life experience is considered to be related to an "essential function" of the job. The interviewer CAN ask about the person's history when there is a "bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ)." This is clearly the case with peer-based positions. In order to attract people who have lived experience with a behavioral health condition or substance use issue, the job posting will need to specifically include language about applicant's behavioral health status and comfort with sharing their own recovery story to engage, support, and inspire others.

## Defining Lived Experience

Each person's personal experience will be different and incorporate different expertise. No one candidate will have the same skill set, the skill set will be as unique as the individuals experience. In interviewing, think about asking questions to show lived experience as evidenced by at least some of the following:

- Active participation in an IEP meeting/ case planning/ team meeting, not just attendance at or knowledge of.
- Advocating in a school, therapy, medical, or community setting on behalf of themselves or a child they are parenting.
- Lived experience in the parenting role of (guardian, foster parent, grandparent, caregiver) a child who has emotional, developmental, behavioral, or mental health concerns is a REQUIRED element for a PSP. Likewise, lived experience with direct lived experience with mental health challenges as a youth is a REQUIRED element for a YPSS.
- Ability to have developed from their own lived experience an ability and willingness to appropriately share their story to motivate and support others.
- Self-Advocacy
- Knows and understands the importance of being open and honest about their insight.
- Self-Awareness – aware of strengths, challenges and areas for growth
- Non-Judgmental – No judgement of others in terms of their journey and their experiences (no blame, no shame)
- Ability to share their own story and awareness of the amount and appropriateness of what and when to share their story with others.
- Ability to allow the family/youth to lead the relationship and goals and follow the lead of family/youth in assisting them.
- Ability to develop common ground with those with which you might have conflicting ideas to make progress to a common goal.

## Opportunities to Assess a Candidate

You can make use of multiple opportunities to assess applicants to be sure you get the right fit. Interviewing a PSP/YPSS does not have to be and should not be, a one day, one hour assessment. Ideally, there will be a prescreen call, initial interview and then a final interview. It is highly recommend having a standard way of documenting assessment of applicants.

- **Application** – Be sure that the non-negotiables are clearly defined in the application. The more direct you are with the job requirements, the better. Examples:
  - Do you have direct lived experience with mental health as a youth (if interviewing for a YPSS position)? Do you have lived experience as a parent/guardian (if interviewing for PSP position)? Be sure to ask candidate to define their lived experience.
  - Are you willing and able to use your lived experience to support others through strategic sharing?
  - Ability to attend certification requirements
    - PSP/YPSS **must** be able to attend and fully participate in 100% of classroom-style trainings, regularly scheduled monthly Coaching Calls,

quarterly Professional Development Meetings, and Technical Assistance as scheduled.

- If flexible hours are needed, can they work them?
  - *Ex. I understand that the role of a PSP/YPSS requires a flexible schedule and working some evenings and weekends based on the needs of the youth/families I serve, and the expectations established by the hiring agency.*
- If driving is required does that mean you need valid driver's license, reliable transportation, insurance coverage.
  - *Ex. I understand that reliable transportation is required for this position and agree to maintain reliable transportation and appropriate insurance coverage.*
  - It is good to make sure that the applicant not only has insurance coverage but has at least a basic amount that can protect an individual, and personal injury base to protect the organization.
  - It is also recommended that organizations have clear policies on transporting youth/young adults or families.
  
- **Prescreen Call** - Consider starting the interview process with a screening call, not just a call to schedule an interview. This call would be designed to establish that the applicant meets some of the basic, non-negotiables criteria for the position. Candidates who cleared the initial screening would be invited to proceed to come in for an interview.
  
- For the **interview**, it is best to have a set of preapproved questions that the interviewer can pull from. This allows the interview to adapt the questions to the interview but also ensures that all applicants are being given standardized questions.

Some examples to draw from

- Parent Support Partners/Youth Peer Support Specialists are often considered to be “change agents” within organizations. How will your experiences help you to be a change agent, and how would you see this happening?
- Describe your previous experience – both paid and unpaid – working with diverse youth or parents/caregivers. How would you put that experience to work with this position?

- What barriers have you identified that limit the capacity of professionals to work with youth/young adults or parents/caregivers and what strategies have you used to overcome those?
- Describe how you would see yourself collaborating with child- and family-serving organizations these and other family organizations to increase youth/family involvement across the systems that impact children and youth with special healthcare/mental health needs and their families?
- For PSP Position: Describe your previous experience – both paid and unpaid – supporting diverse parents/caregivers to become more involved in decision-making about their individual child? For YPS Position: Describe your previous experience – both paid and unpaid – supporting youth/young adults/peers to become more involved in decision-making about themselves in their treatment?
- Explain the level of experience you have with maintaining case files. If you do not have experience with this, share some examples of other documenting activities you have performed.
- Please describe the experience you have in navigating systems (i.e., Education, MDHHS, CMH, Juvenile Justice, Child Welfare, Vocational Rehabilitation, Medicaid, etc.) What were your greatest challenges and where did you see success?
- Why do you want to become a PSP/YPSS? Why do you think it is important for PSPs/YPSSs to share their experiences?
- For PSP position: Briefly describe the most valuable assistance/support you have received as a parent/caregiver. For YPS position: Briefly describe the most valuable assistance/support you have received as a youth in your mental health journey.
- What skills will you bring to the job that will allow you to support others to advocate for themselves or their families while being in a partnership with other staff members?
- This position is unique, in that you may be the only member with lived experience as part of team. How would you go about engaging the other members of the team where you are the only member with lived experience?

## Interview Questions

Not every question is right for every applicant, but it is important that you have a listing of questions that are standard that interviewers choose from. Allowing the interviewer to choose the questions they ask allows the adaptation of the interview to the applicant but having standard questions to choose from keeps the process standardized. The questions should be a mix of general and personal experience questions.

### General interview questions

Below are some **general interview questions** that you can build on to help you identify potential skill sets in your applicants:

- What do you know or believe about the family-driven/youth-guided and driven approach?
- If you were given a magic wand to make changes in children's mental services in (this town), what changes would you make? Why?
- What type of work do you envision in your role as a PSP/YPSS?
- How would you engage parents/caregivers or youth/young adults to use their voice and make their own choices?
- Describe how would engage with a parent/guardian or youth/young adult who isn't so sure you are the right person to work with their family or them?
- What are your thoughts about how to best support youth and parents/caregivers of children with emotional and behavioral health needs?
- Please describe your thoughts on personal boundaries and how you set yours?
- This position is unique, in that you may be the only member with lived experience as part of team. How would you go about engaging the other members of the team where you are the only member with lived experience?
- Can you tell us what type of supervision you work best with and why?
- Tell us about the best supervisor you have had and explain why you feel that way.
- Tell us about a time you have had difficulty with a supervisor? How did you resolve the conflict?
- What are the three strengths or skills you believe prepares you best for this position?
- How do you organize yourself when faced with multiple tasks with varying priorities?
- Do you intentionally practice boundary setting? Any examples you are comfortable sharing with us?
- Tell us about a time that teamwork worked or did not work well for you. Please explain why you think this occurred.
- Where do you see yourself in your career 2 years from now? 5 years from now?

## Personal experience interview questions

Below are some personal experience interview questions that you can build on to help you identify potential skill sets in your applicants:

- Many of us come into this kind of work because we have had experiences in our own lives which drive our passion for improving the lives of young people. If you are willing, would you share a little bit about yourself and how experiences in your own life allow you to understand this work in a more complete way?  
**Note: This should be a pencil down question. During this question interview should be engaged in listening to the applicant and no written notes about what they are sharing should be taken**
- Tell us about what unique life skills from your personal journey would allow you to bring to the table for the peers you would serve?
- Can you give an example of a time that you have offered support to a parents/caregiver or peer who had different values/beliefs with which you did not agree?
- Give an example of a time you have advocated for yourself or another.
- What are some of the agencies/systems in the community that you have navigated in your personal journey?
- We have all had to give difficult feedback. Give us an example of a time you had to do this and how did you manage it?
- Can you tell me some ways that you might use your personal lived experience to support the people you would be working with?
- What role has PSP or YPS had in your own life?
- If you felt your job was causing an increase in your stress level, what would you do?
- What has worked well for you when navigating the various systems you or your child were involved in (schools, mental health, etc.)? Please also share with us which systems you have personal experience with.
- This position requires you to share your own (YPS) or your family's "story" (PSP). What parts of your story are you willing to you share with us today?
- This position will serve diverse community members with potentially different points of view, beliefs, backgrounds, values, etc. than you may have. What kinds of things can you do to ensure youth/young adults or parents/caregivers receive support in the way they want it?
- Tell us about any experiences, skills, or strengths that you have or will use to relate to or effectively work with youth/young adults or parents/caregivers.
- What challenges do you anticipate in your role as a PSP/YPSS?
- In what ways could you empower and support youth or young adults or parents/caregivers to be involved in the various systems their child may be involved in?

## Documents to Reference

### [Assessing Readiness to Become a Parent Peer Support Provider](#)

### [City of Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services | Peer Support Toolkit \(dbhids.org\)](#)

- Although developed for Adult Peers this toolkit is a great tool and has a whole Module on Recruiting and Hire Peer Support Staff that you could benefit from review. Highly recommend that you make use of Module 2 on Recruiting and Hiring Peer Support.
- Page 190 has a sample interview score sheet.
- Page 195/196 has a sample screening tool score sheet.

### [Family, Parent and Caregiver Peer Support in Behavioral Health](#)

This [two-page graphic](#) from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines peer support for parents and other caregivers, lists what parent support providers do, and cites research that illustrates the benefits of parent support services. This publication is also available as a Spanish language publication. It can be used to help explain Family Peer Support.

### [Learning Community for Family Leaders: Workforce Development – Readiness for Becoming a Parent Peer](#)