



Executive Summary of the Legacy Report

Youth Peer Support Pilot Project

March 2022

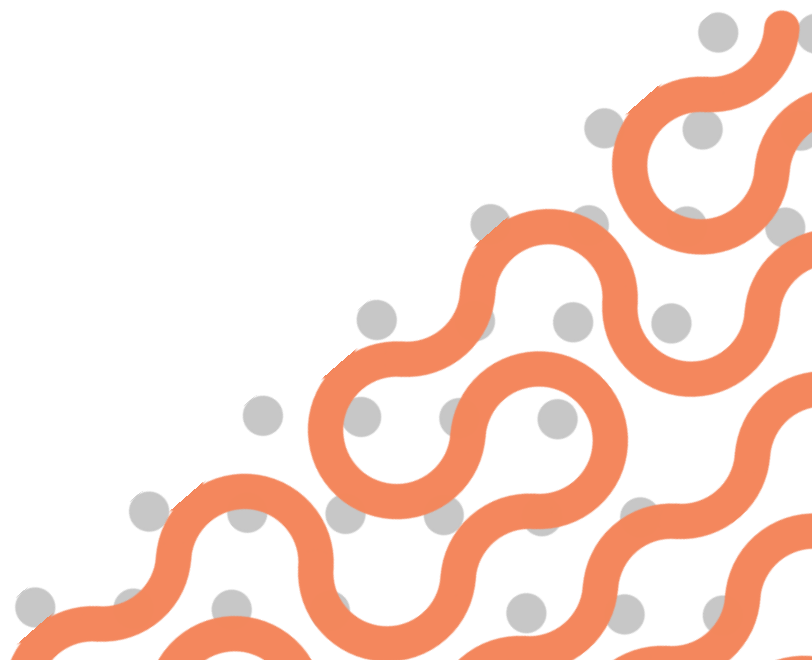


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Throughout this executive summary, the *Legacy Report* of the Youth Peer Support pilot project has been referenced and is available upon request by contacting evaluation@everymind.ca.

Recommended reference for this report:

EveryMind Mental Health Services (2022). *Executive summary of the legacy report: Youth Peer Support Pilot Project*. <https://everymind.ca/youth-engagement/>

Executive Summary of the Legacy Report Youth Peer Support Pilot Project



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Introduction: Context for the Pilot Project

The Youth Peer Support pilot project was part of the youth engagement (YE) priority established in the child and youth mental health (CYMH) system transformation plans for the Peel service area. These plans defined Peel's local priorities and deliverables to fulfill the Ontario government's goals as set out in the provincial transformation plans, *Moving on Mental Health: A system that makes sense for children and youth* (2012) and *Roadmap to Wellness: A Plan to Build Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions System* (2020). The lead agency's current three-year plan (2020/21 to 2022/23) for CYMH system transformation in Peel continues to identify YE and family engagement (FE) as system-wide priorities.

Peel's YE and FE priorities also align with *Program Guidelines and Requirements #01, Core Services and Key Processes* (2015) for Child, Youth and Family Engagement.

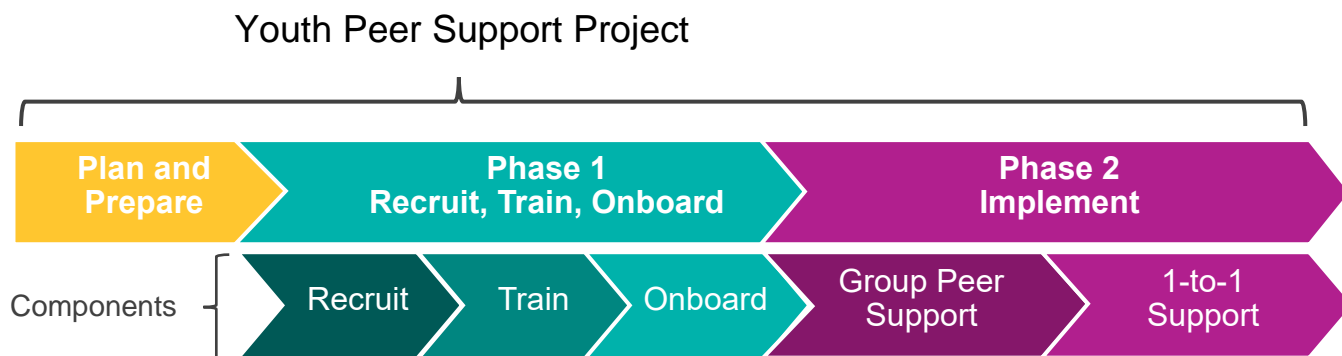
Project Overview

The project's key enablers included:

- Peel's Youth Engagement Committee (YEC), which has youth and staff (adult ally) members from Peel's CYMH agencies
- Peel's CYMH Lead Agency, EveryMind Mental Health Services, and Core Service Providers at the time of the project: Associated Youth Services of Peel, EveryMind, Rapport Youth & Family Services, and the child and adolescent mental health clinics at Trillium Health Partners and William Osler Health System
- the project team consisting of members from Peel's YEC and EveryMind's Youth Engagement Coordinator, responsible Manager, and Evaluation and Research Specialist.

A Detailed View of the Project, Including Timeline

The project timeline started in January 2018 when Peel's Youth Engagement Working Group (later renamed the Youth Engagement Committee) presented the idea of establishing a Youth Peer-to-Peer Support Program as a CYMH system-wide initiative to the Peel Core Service Providers' planning table. The project concluded with completion of the second cohort of the Youth Peer Support pilot in winter 2021 followed by a presentation of the project's findings to Core Service Providers in March 2021 and publication of the legacy report in March 2022.



Plan and Prepare

Key steps in the project's planning and preparation phase included:

- Feedback from youth and staff who attended an “Art of Youth Engagement” training event for Peel’s Core Service Providers as well as focus groups with youth to inform the components of an effective youth peer support program
- An environmental scan of other Peer Support models used in the Greater Toronto area
- Development of a proposal for the Youth Peer Support pilot project, including a logic model
- Finalizing the proposal with Peel’s Lead Agency and Core Service Providers
- Obtaining funding approval from the Lead Agency’s senior leadership team.

Recruit, Train, and Onboard

This section captures Phase 1 elements (recruit, train, and onboard) that were key to the pilot project's success.

- **Recruitment** of youth ages 18-25 years old used an application process that was:
 - Co-developed with youth using a “Dot-mocracy” exercise to determine weight of application questions
 - Implemented via an application on the SurveyMonkey platform combined with outreach to target youth who had lived experience with mental health challenges
 - Appraised using a ranking process developed with support from EveryMind’s Evaluation and Research Specialist.
- A robust **training program** provided youth with learning, skills, and support to enable them to succeed in their role. Weekly sessions from Oct 19, 2019 to Dec 7, 2019 covered:
 - Introduction to Youth Peer Support & Youth Engagement
 - Mental Health Recovery & Resilience; Introduction to Mental Health Service Systems in Peel
 - Facilitation Skills, Interpersonal Skills and Relationship-Building; Wellness Planning
 - Crisis Situation Preparation and Planning; Crisis Holistic Approach
 - Healthy Boundaries; Strategic Story-Telling for Peer Support
 - SafeTALK Training (Suicide Prevention)
 - Closing: Ending the Relationship.
- A panel interview process with Peel’s YEC was used to select four Youth Peer Support Workers (YPSWs). The candidates were seven youth who had completed the training program. A scoring matrix and discussion resulted in consensus on the four successful candidates, who were then **onboarded**.
- A fixed model of **supervision** used bi-weekly Saturday team meetings and weekly one-on-one sessions – later supplemented with optional team meetings on Fridays – to ensure that the YPSWs had consistent and reliable access to supervision for the completion of project planning, content creation and ideation, evaluation planning, organizational updates, problem-solving, and personal check-ins.
- The YPSWs also had access to **professional development** training opportunities at EveryMind including ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training), facilitation, project management, program development, organizational webinars and trainings, and diversity discussions.

Program Implementation

Phase 2, Implement occurred between spring 2020 and winter 2021, with two key components:

1. **Group peer support sessions led by YPSW**
2. **1-to-1 support sessions offered by the YPSWs.**

Two cycles with different cohorts of youth were offered in summer-fall 2020 and winter 2021.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic had just begun as the project began Phase 2, with stay-at-home orders and a need for physical distancing, the project pivoted to virtual implementation. Another pandemic-related adjustment encouraged youth to self-refer as clinician referrals were not at the level anticipated pre-pandemic, reflecting the CYMH sector-wide reduction in the number of clients seeking mental health support in the pandemic's early months. Use of social media and sharing of information via youth hubs, colleges and universities, and the YPSWs' own networks successfully boosted participation in the pilot.

A two-step application program was used: a digital application via SurveyMonkey followed by a Zoom/phone consultation to determine the youths' interest, fit, and suitability (e.g., youth had received mental health counselling). The second stage included administration of a modified Columbia Suicide Rating Scale by either the YE Coordinator or an EveryMind Intake Specialist. Four youth screened out after the second step because they had either suicidal ideation or needs that could not be met by the program. These four youth were offered alternative supports.

Group peer support

The groups were offered weekly over a two-month period, with separate sessions for ages 14-17 and 18-25 years old. The session content was developed by the YPSWs with support from the YE Coordinator and Manager, and the groups were facilitated by the YPSWs. The topics all related to mental health and wellness:

- Week 1: Introduction to Peer Support
- Week 2: Growth and Change
- Week 3: Boundaries
- Week 4: Exploring the Self
- Week 5: Stigma
- Week 6: Grit and Resilience
- Week 7: Mindfulness and Wellness
- Week 8: Closing the Peer Support Relationship

1-to-1 support

Optional 1-to-1 support was provided to youth following completion of the group sessions. YPSWs met weekly with youth by phone or Zoom for Healthcare for a duration of up to eight weeks. These sessions provided emotional, social, and practical support.

Evaluation Framework

Evaluation Approach and Objectives

Evaluation was conducted using an **exploratory approach** that helped to account for both anticipated and unanticipated program outcomes. Aligning with this approach, data collection involved both formative and summative feedback, collected using qualitative and quantitative methods. A logic model was developed and is included in the legacy report as Appendix C.

Process and outcome evaluation questions were developed for participants and YPSWs. The process questions were designed to evaluate how the program was implemented and if it was implemented as intended, while the outcome questions related to the changes that occurred as a result of the program.

Data Collection Approaches

- **Program indicators** – captured information related to the process evaluation questions and did not involve engaging program participants. Data sources included youths' answers to content-based and demographic questions from the peer support training; program data such as attendance and number of times each part of the program was accessed; and session topics.
- **Formative feedback** – engaged program participants throughout the program for both **process and outcome evaluation**. Since the program had pivoted to a virtual format, two online tools – SurveyMonkey questionnaires and Mentimeter polls – were used on a weekly basis after each session.
 - **Quantitative** questions included four or five statements about the quality of the content covered (e.g., “The information was presented in a clear and understandable way”) and were scored using a 5-point Likert scale. For training sessions, supplementary statements related to each weekly topic were also included.
 - **Qualitative** evaluation included open-ended questions (e.g., “What was one take-away from this session?”) and a space for group participants to share additional feedback or questions.
 - In addition, feedback data on the session which included SafeTALK facilitated by Karen Grant from LifeWorks, was collected by the session facilitators and results were shared with the evaluation team.
- **Summative feedback** – engaged youth following the program for outcome evaluation to gather their feedback, program experiences, and program outcomes, which were collected through a variety of qualitative processes.
 - **Peer Support Training** used a “World Café” activity on the final day of training, with small groups rotating around three questions and engaging in dialogue around each question.
 - **Youth participants' experiences** with groups and 1-to-1 support were gathered through surveys, interviews, and focus groups.
 - **YPSWs** completed a two-step summative evaluation activity:
 1. question-guided written journal reflections; and
 2. a focus group that discussed preliminary themes from their reflections.

Analytic Approach

All **quantitative** data were analyzed with a similar approach (frequencies, percentages or mean scores, as appropriate for the type of data) while **qualitative** data were explored using a thematic analysis. While feedback was gathered from a representative sample of participants using a variety of data collection methods, the information in this report is limited to that provided by willing participants.

For more information on the evaluation framework and methods used, please see the legacy report.

Findings

Recruitment and Training

From 41 youth who expressed interest in the youth peer support training, 31 continued to the second stage and completed the questions that were ranked to determine the successful applicants. Highlights below relate to the **31 participants**.

Recruitment

Applicant demographics

- The majority of the applicants were fulltime students (n=8); fulltime students working part-time (n=6); working part-time (n=6); or working fulltime (n=5).
- Smaller proportions were part-time students (n=2); part-time student working part-time (n=1); or none of the above categories (n=3).

How did youth hear about Peer Support Training?

- 29% learned through a friend/peer
- 23% through a promotional flyer or outreach event
- 13% learned through a youth mental health agency
- 6% through social media
- 29% learn through other means, which youth listed as: ECLYPSE Youth Resource Centre, school social workers, LinkedIn, Nexus Youth Centre, and family members.

For more detail on recruitment and for graphic depictions of this data, see the legacy report.

How did the applicants define peer support?

Youth applicants generally had a strong understanding of this term that aligned with the definition shared by the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (rebranded in 2021 as the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions). Figure 4 of the legacy report features a word cloud illustrating the qualities applicants listed for a good youth peer support worker.

Training

Youth applicants needed to attend all training sessions to obtain a certificate of completion. The details below apply to the **18 youth (90%) who completed the training** in the fall of 2019.

Feedback by the Numbers

Participants rated their training very highly, as indicated by the average feedback scores of all weekly training sessions (figure 5 in the legacy report).

- 95%** *The facilitator was knowledgeable about the topic*
- 93%** *The information was presented in a clear and understandable*
- 94%** *What I learned will help be become an effective YPSW*
- 90%** *I felt comfortable participating in discussions*
- 91%** *Overall, I was satisfied with the session*

Table 3 in the legacy report provides further quantitative ratings on questions that were uniquely tailored to the respective goals of each session. High average ratings ranging between 82% and 97% indicated that the majority of participants agreed with statements about a range of benefits (increased knowledge, understanding, abilities etc.) of the training sessions.

Feedback through Comments

This section provides thematic summary of youth's feedback on three open-ended questions:

1. What did you like the most?
2. What did you like the least?
3. What was one take-away from this session?

Comment themes included:

- **General structure** – youth appreciated the breaks and snacks as well as the organized, clear slides that were shared ahead of time. Constructive feedback included requests for more frequent breaks/movement, less didactic learning, and a more spacious facility.
- **Activity feedback** – youth provided very positive feedback on the activities, with little criticism. Role-playing was the activity most frequently mentioned as being beneficial. Youth appreciated how the activities broke up information-sharing and allowed information to “sink in”.
- **Information shared** – youth valued the knowledge they gained and appreciated practical examples and tangible resources. Some youth expressed a desire for more in-depth learning (e.g., learning more about “triggers”).
- **Safe space** – multiple participants responded that a safe space to learn was **what they liked the most** about the training.
- **A noteworthy “nothing”** – there were several of these in response to the question, “What did you like the least?” In other words, there was little that the youth disliked about the training.
- **Speaker feedback** – multiple youth mentioned specific speakers as **what they liked the most**, suggesting that the training had strong facilitators.
- In response to the question about “one take-away”, the most common responses related to opportunities for **skills development** and **broadening knowledge**.

Training Outcomes

The **World Café** held on the final day of training facilitated dialogue on three specific questions:

1. How did the training **impact** you?
2. What is your level of **readiness** to engage in youth peer support work?
3. What other thoughts/ideas do you have about **how YPSWs can contribute to the system**?

Themes from this dialogue included:

- **Training impact** – youth provided multiple examples of gains in the areas of increased knowledge, personal growth and understanding, with much enthusiasm for the positive environment, outstanding team and good nourishment, both mentally and physically.
- **Readiness to engage in youth peer support work** – responses are summarized through two main themes:
 - **Ready but nervous** (not unexpected for youth preparing to take on a new role);

- **Additional learning areas** – these included aggressive behaviours and responses; more examples of facilitators’ professional/personal experiences; types of concerns that youth would bring to YPSWs; and a facilitation outline.
- Thoughts/ideas on **how YPSWs can contribute to the system** – participants saw the YPSW role as helping to fill “gaps” and “wait times” throughout the youth mental health system and made recommendations about types of programming that could be led by YPSWs, e.g., role modelling/mentorship, addressing stigma and youth outreach. The participants also made suggestions on specific topics of relevance to youth, e.g., “help with family life,” “cultural” experiences, support through transitions (e.g., to and from college/university), self-love/growth, and stress management.

Youth Peer Support Program

Who participated in the program?

The number of participants was higher in the fall cycle than in the winter cycle. For the two cycles combined, the numbers of participants who accessed the program were:

- Groups: Ages 14-17: n = 11
 Ages 18-25: n = 12
- One to one: Ages 14-17: n = 6
 Ages 18-25: n = 5

What was covered in the program?

Group Component

The purpose of the group component was to create a space for youth to make peer-to-peer connections with other individuals who have similar lived experience. The YPSWs facilitated discussions on topics like resilience and grit, mindfulness, self-reflection and self-awareness, breaking down stigma, boundaries, and growth and change.

Figure 6. Average of Weekly Group Session Feedback Scores

Summer Cohort	Winter Cohort	Feedback Question
92%	98%	Overall, I was satisfied with the session.
89%	98%	I felt comfortable participating in discussions.
95%	97%	The facilitator was knowledgeable about the topic.
96%	97%	The information was presented in a clear and understandable.

In addition to the data captured in figure 6 above, this section of the legacy report includes select answers to the question, “What did you find the most helpful about the peer support group?” highlighted in figure 7.

1-to-1 Component

Eleven youth accessed the 1-to-1 component. A variety of topics were touched on in the 1-to-1 components. The main themes discussed are presented figure 9 below.

Figure 9. Topics discussed during the 1-to-1 sessions.



Program Outcomes

Youth Participant Program Outcomes

Program outcomes were informed by conversations with youth participants and YPSWs. Discussions with youth and YPSWs were analyzed for themes and the following **four themes** were observed across both samples, offering convergent validity.

1. **Connection** – youth feeling they are not alone and someone else is going through the same thing
2. **A Brave Space to Share** – therapeutic feeling of sharing and voicing their concerns in a safe space
3. **Building a Toolkit** – strategies to better manage daily difficulties
4. **Personal Growth** – as observed in the youth participants by the YPSWs.

Please see the legacy report for participant quotes that expand upon these themes.

Youth Peer Support Worker Outcomes

The four YPSWs were asked to complete written journals, reflecting on guiding questions about their experience in the program, the benefits they experienced, and the benefits experienced by the program participants. **Reciprocity of benefits** for youth participants and YPSWs was a common journal theme and became the subject of the YPSW focus group. It appears that the YPSWs benefited in the same way as the youth participants because in the youth peer support model, much learning comes from sharing and listening to the experiences

of others. To quote a YPSW, “*you’re going through it with them, it’s not a power dynamic, it’s not I’m teaching you or I’m advising you. It’s I’m here with you and I’m supporting you.*”

The report notes subtle differences in how the YPSWs experienced the themes of *Connection*, *A Brave Space to Share*, *Building a Toolkit*, and *Personal Growth* compared to the youth participants. In addition, a unique and distinct outcome theme, **Professional Development**, was identified for the YPSWs, reflecting the benefits of being involved in a worker/staff capacity.

Program Feedback

Youth Participant Program Feedback

The feedback that youth participants shared were highly positive, with several inquiring about the availability of similar program offerings, or expressing interest in participating in the program again. When asked to reflect on the program’s structure, some wanted longer and/or more sessions while others felt that the program length was adequate.

Group Component – Feedback is presented by three themes:

1. **Program Topics** – in addition to naming topics that were most impactful, participants were asked to name additional topics of interest. Suggestions for the future included: rediscovery of one’s identity outside mental illness; dealing with apathy; and learning how not to mistrust and how to cope better. A key suggestion was to provide a menu of topics from which each cohort could select based on interest and need.
2. **Program Activities** – while there was limited discussion on this area, participants preferred engaging in activities over didactic learning.
3. **Practical Program Implementation Strategies** – recommendations were to continue implementing the program in the same way, with appreciation for the presentation slides, providing access to notes after each session, and collecting weekly feedback to be reviewed and implemented. Participants also appreciated the environment (e.g., icebreakers, reflections, check-ins) that created a “*genuine welcoming culture.*” Constructive criticism included spending less time in didactic presentations and more time in activities or group discussions.

1-to-1 Component – Feedback is presented under four themes:

1. **Understanding Peer 1-to-1s** – Most participants expressed strong understanding of 1-to-1 peer support.
2. **My YPSW Was the Best** – Every participant provided outstanding reviews of the support they received.
3. **Who are the YPSWs?** – Participants who participated in the 1-to-1 sessions and those who did not both thought they would benefit from knowing more about each YPSW before signing up for the 1-to-1 sessions to help them select the YPSW that would resonate with them most.
4. **Reasons for not accessing 1-to-1 sessions** – Those who did not access 1-to-1 sessions provided a few reasons. In all cases, there were no significant barriers to access but rather, youth had too much on their plates to prioritize it or felt that they did not need additional support.

Reflections from Peer Support Workers

The YPSWs' perspective of the program is distinct from that of youth participants, given their active role in program delivery. Five themes summarize program feedback from the YPSWs.

1. **Continue to Involve Youth** – highlighted the importance of involving youth in discussions about the delivery of the program.
2. **Scaling the Program** – suggested having experienced YPSWs act as mentors/supervisors for future YPSWs and support youth training. The YPSWs expressing their desire to stay involved.
3. **Program Structure** – recommended continuing to have a group portion follow a structured set of topics; increasing the number of groups sessions from 8 to 10; and timing 1-to-1 support flexibly based on youth feedback (could run concurrent with the group rather than afterward).
4. **Financial Compensation** – commented that the compensation provided was disproportional to the work they put in (which extended beyond their scheduled shifts), and was lower than that offered for similar opportunities. The YPSWs thought that the emotional demands of their work, compared to more physical jobs, merited compensation to reflect that.
5. **Supervision Feedback** – YPSWs provided very positive feedback on the supervision they received from the YE Coordinator and Manager. Their feedback is divided into three subthemes:
 - **My Contribution is Valuable** – YPSWs felt they were valued, contributing members of the Youth Peer Support program.
 - **Authentic Empowering Leaders** – YPSWs viewed the YE Coordinator and Manager as genuine leaders who empowered them to use their voices and strengths to contribute.
 - **Practical Strategies** – YPSWs identified three key strategies the YE Coordinator and Manager used to make the YPSWs feel valuable: **requesting contribution**; **having a positive attitude**; and **sharing opportunities**.

Learnings and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

Recruitment



Communications publicizing youth peer support training need to be pushed through outreach, and a variety of forums and media, to reach a broad range of youth.



When planning and scheduling training, be prepared to work around youths' multiple competing demands on their time (e.g., school and work).



Many youth peer support training applicants have previous experience either providing or receiving peer support, and have lived experience of mental health concerns personally or from supporting their family/friends.



Youths' interest in youth peer support training frequently aligns with their career and educational pursuits and/or a desire to share their experience to support others in their recovery journey.

Training



Virtually all components of youth peer support training received positive participant feedback with "agree" or "strongly agree" responses (specifics provided in the legacy report).



Benefits of youth peer support training included increases in knowledge and/or understanding of youth peer support, personal growth, and a positive learning environment. Additional learning areas are suggested in the legacy report.



Youth felt that peer support is helpful to fill "gaps" and "wait times" in the youth mental health service system.



Types of programs that may appropriately be led by youth peer support workers include role modeling/mentorship, initiatives to address stigma, and outreach.



Topics well suited for youth peer support are family life and/or unique "cultural" experiences, managing life transitions, and self-compassion/stress management.

Implementation



Youth in the two age cohorts (14-17/18-25) showed equal interest in accessing the youth peer support program.



Participants in the youth peer support program experienced a sense of connection, a brave space to share, and personal growth. They also developed a toolkit of strategies to better manage their daily difficulties.



Youth peer support workers experienced benefits similar to the youth peer support participants. Both workers and participants experienced reciprocity (i.e., they learned and benefitted from each other).



Youth who participated in the youth peer support program wanted more of it and inquired about similar opportunities.



The group component - with topics such as resilience, stigma, goal planning, setting boundaries, self-care, how to find support, and dealing with barriers - was well received. Participants also offered suggestions for future topics.



Participants in 1-to-1 support had very positive feedback about the support from their peers. The 2 participants who did not seek 1-to-1 support wanted information about the YPSWs to choose a worker who resonated with them.



Youth valued being included in all phases of the pilot, from planning to implementation. In scaling the program, consider ways to empower youth through different roles in the program structure (e.g., lead/supervisor/trainer).



Participation in the group component may not need to be a prerequisite to participating in 1-to-1 peer support. These two types of support could occur in parallel or as independent units.



It is important that financial compensation for youth peer support workers reflect their full contributions. Responsibilities of the workers extended beyond the allocated work hours and involved emotional as well as physical work.



Youth peer support workers felt their contribution was valuable throughout the program. Successful strategies used by the YE coordinator and responsible manager included seeking contributions from youth, having a positive attitude, and sharing opportunities.



It is important to provide virtual program participants with a token (e.g., a gift card) in lieu of resources that would have been included during in-person programming (e.g., refreshments; stationery).

Recommendations

	Offer youth peer support as part of the core service system before, during, and after services, including bridging to the adult mental health system and ensuring that client perception and feedback are integrated as part of the process.
	Ensure effective co-creation and co-development by continuing to utilize principles of youth engagement as the foundation for youth peer support models. This includes being responsive to youth feedback throughout the process.
	Support, collaboration, and buy-in are necessary from all levels, including senior leadership, management, staff, and youth, to develop and implement a youth-need-based program.
	Carefully consider the necessary supports and resources, e.g., compensation for youth peer support workers, pay (gender/marketplace/internal) equity, and allotted time per work schedule, to successfully implement and sustain youth peer support services.
	Offer youth peer support training annually to young adults with lived experience to build their resilience, develop leadership skills, increase their formal knowledge, and build community capacity.
	System leaders should explore innovative strategies to engage youth with lived experience and knowledge of the system, and offer meaningful professional development and employment opportunities.