Future Focused Education's Youth Peer Support Specialist Youth Apprenticeship



Who we are

Future Focused Education is an Albuquerque-based non-profit that partners statewide with young people and their communities to transform the educational experience—especially for historically underserved youth. By honoring local wisdom and creating real-world opportunities, we prepare students to lead and thrive.

The need

This Youth Apprenticeship is a strategic investment that can ultimately save lives.

New Mexico's current workforce can meet only

30%

of the state's behavioral health needs.

32 of 33

of the state's 33 counties are designated Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas.

The pathway

Building a sustainable behavioral health workforce requires early investment—creating clear pathways where young people see themselves as future professionals, leaders, and advocates in the field.

Future Focused Education worked with partners across the state to co-design a Youth Peer Support Specialist Apprenticeship that bridges immediate mental health needs with long-term workforce development, creating a paid career pathway that prioritizes the holistic well-being of the apprentice as they support their peers and strengthen their communities.



What is

A Youth Peer Support Specialist?

A Youth Peer Support Specialist (YPSS) is a trained and certified young adult who uses relevant lived experience strategically to build trusting relationships, strengthen self-advocacy and personal agency, navigate systems and community resources, and identify holistic practices that support the wellbeing of other youth and young adults (YYA).

A YPSS complement's counselors, social workers, school-based health center teams, and other clinicians by advancing mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention and supporting crisis response, warm referrals, and connections to appropriate services.

43

Forty-three (43) competencies guide the work the YPSS Youth Apprentice completes under the guidance of a mentor.

The competencies are organized across six domains:



- **Cultural Humility & Responsiveness**
- **Ethical Framework**
- **Engagement with Youth & Young Adults (YYA)**
- **Effective Communication**
- **Professional Behavior**
- **Advocacy & Social Justice**

Cultural Humility & Responsiveness

Domain I: Cultural Humility & Responsiveness			
	Level 1 (Emerging)	**Level 2 (Developing)**	**Level 3 (Proficient)**
	Evidence Criteria	**Evidence Criteria**	**Evidence Criteria**
i	When prompted by a mentor, identifies personal values, cultural lenses, and privilege, occasionally recognizing how implicit biases might affect their support for diverse YYA.	More frequently and more independently reflects on personal values, cultural and identity lenses, and privilege, trying to interrupt implicit biases to deliver non-judgmental, equitable support to diverse YYA.	Continuously manages personal values, cultural and identity lenses, and privilege through ongoing self-reflection and growth to interrupt implicit biases and deliver equitable, non-judgmental support to diverse YYA.
ii	With support from a mentor, identifies personal, cultural, and linguistic assets and lived experience and explores how these can be used to connect with YYA.	More independently identifies and shares appropriately personal, cultural, and linguistic assets and lived experience to build trust and foster connections with YYA.	Independently identifies and leverages appropriately best practices, such as sharing personal, cultural, and linguistic assets and lived experience, to build trust and foster connection and relationships with YYA.
iii	With guidance from a mentor, recognizes how and when to ask questions to learn about a YYA's unique cultural needs and customs.	More independently and routinely asks non-judgmental questions to learn about a YYA's unique cultural needs and customs, requiring less prompting over time.	Consistenlty uses curious, non-judgmental questioning to understand a YYA's unique cultural needs and customs.
iv	With guidance from a mentor, identifies basic concepts of systemic oppression, prejudice, and historical trauma as factors that impact YYA.	More independently and more frequently applies an understanding of systemic oppression, prejudice, and historical trauma into conversations when supporting YYA	Identifies and integrates an understanding of systemic oppression, prejudice, and historical trauma into support practices to help YYA navigate and reframe their perceptions of self, others, and their experiences.
v	Recognizes the value of cultural communities, spiritual beliefs, or land-based learning opportunities to support a YYA's identity, belonging, and mattering.	Regularly assists YYA in exploring their cultural communities, spiritual beliefs, or land-based learning opportunities.	Consistently supports YYA in identifying and connecting with their cultural communities, spiritual beliefs, or land-based learning opportunities to foster a sense of identity, belonging, and mattering.
vi	Identifies a YYA's specific preferences, communication styles, accessibility needs, accommodations, and identity-based needs.	Regularly adapts peer services to meet the YYA's unique preferences, communication styles, accessibility needs, accommodations, and identity-based needs of YYA.	Consistently adapts peer services to meet the YYA's unique preferences, communication styles, accessibility needs, accommodations, and identity-based needs of YYA.

Ethical Framework

Domain II: Ethical Framework			
	Level 1 (Emerging)	**Level 2 (Developing)**	**Level 3 (Proficient)**
	Evidence Criteria	**Evidence Criteria**	**Evidence Criteria**
i	Identifies the key principles of the YPS Code of Ethics and professional standards of care.	Usually applies the YPS Code of Ethics and professional standards of care to guide interactions and decisions.	Consistenly upholds the YPS Code of Ethics and professional standards of care by consistently applying ethical principles to guide interactions and decision-making.
ii	Identifies the boundaries of the YPSS scope of practice, including what to avoid (clinical/diagnostic roles, blurring boundaries, handling acute safety concerns alone), needing frequent support, direction, or correction from a mentor.	Adheres to the YPSS professional scope of practice, needing only some support, direction, or correction from a mentor	Adheres independently and strictly to the YPSS professional scope of practice—ensuring they do NOT cross into clinical, diagnostic, or advisory roles, make decisions on behalf of youth, blur personal-professional boundaries, or handle acute safety concerns in isolation.
iii	Attends scheduled supervision sessions and shares session notes for review when requested.	Usually prepares for supervision by bringing basic questions, sharing session notes, and bringing up challenges when prompted.	Consistenly prepares for and engages actively in regular supervision by requesting necessary assistance, proactively seeking guidance, and maintaining a willingness to have session notes reviewed.
iv	With support from a mentor, records required program information, attempting to follow basic formatting and program policies, procedures, and legal requirements.	With decreasing support from a mentor, records required program information with growing accuracy and timeliness, generally adhering to program policies, procedures, and legal requirements.	Consistently and independently documents all program information accurately and timely, strictly adhering to all program policies, procedures, and legal requirements.
v	Identifies basic confidentiality laws and rules around boundaries and follows them with frequent support from a mentor.	Adheres to basic confidentiality laws and rules around boundaries and follows them, needing only some support, direction, or correction from a mentor	Protects YYA rights and privacy by following confidentiality laws and professional boundaries, clearly explaining what can and cannot be kept confidential, and understanding that they cannot promise to keep secrets.

Ethical Framework (continued)

Domain II: Ethical Framework (continued)			
	Level 1 (Emerging)	Level 2 (Developing)	Level 3 (Proficient)
	Evidence Criteria	Evidence Criteria	Evidence Criteria
vi	Identifies behaviors that constitute harm, harassment, intimidation, discrimination, or manipulation in the environment.	Responds to instances of harassment, discrimination, or harm by taking initial steps to maintain safety and reporting concerns.	Maintains a safe and inclusive environment by recognizing and responding to harassment, intimidation, discrimination, manipulation, and other forms of harm, and, if necessary, by supporting appropriate reporting and repair.
vii	Recognizes personal stressors and signs of emotional responses like empathy fatigue, vicarious trauma, or retraumatization.	Creates a personal wellness plan to address stressors and emotional responses.	Takes an active role in personal wellness by recognizing personal stressors and emotional responses (such as empathy fatigue, vicarious trauma, or retraumatization) and creating and following implementing a holistic wellness plan.
vii	Using guided prompts or templates along with support from a mentor, has conversations with YYA about communication expectations and contact schedules.	Holds conversations with YYA with increasing independence to establish communication expectations and reach mutual agreement on contact schedules	Independently works with YYA to set and clearly communicate healthy boundaries by agreeing together on how often they will communicate and making sure the relationship is free from pressure, influence, or promises that cannot be guaranteed.
ix	Recognizes appropriate boundaries for professional relationships across physical and digital environments, including social media.	Usually applies healthy boundary rules in day-to-day work interactions and when using digital tools or social media.	Consistently establishes and maintains healthy boundaries in professional relationships and environments, including if/when using social media and other digital tools.
x	Identifies data privacy rules regarding workplace tools, personal devices, social media, and unauthorized AI platforms.	With some support or correction from a mentor, uses workplace digital tools securely without sharing YYA private stories or entering sensitive data into unapproved platforms.	Consistently and independently maintains ethical professiona communication and data privacy when using workplace and personal digital tools and emerging technologies, ensuring youth privacy and personal stories are strictly protected and sensitive information is never entered into unauthorized digital or AI platforms.

Engagement with Youth & Young Adults (YYA)

Domain III: Engagement with Youth & Young Adults (YYA)			
	Level 1 (Emerging)	**Level 2 (Developing)**	**Level 3 (Proficient)**
	Evidence Criteria	**Evidence Criteria**	**Evidence Criteria**
i	With prompts and guidance from a mentor, identifies and shares basic self-advocacy skills with YYA to help them express their needs and goals.	With increasing independence, models and practices self-advocacy skills during interactions with the YYA to support them as they navigate systems, communicate their needs, and pursue self-defined goals	Independently teaches and models self-advocacy skills and supports YYA in using these skills to navigate systems, communicate their needs, and pursue self-defined goals.
ii	With prompting and direction from a mentor, identifies core trauma-informed principles and adolescent development concepts, demonstrating an initial awareness of shifting focus from "What's wrong with you?" to "What has happened to you?"	With minimal or periodic guidance from a mentor, applies trauma-informed approaches and adolescent brain/body development concepts to support the YYA in working toward their self-defined goals.	Consistently and independently, uses proven, trauma-informed approaches and supports that recognize adolescent development and the connection between the brain and body to help YYA achieve their self-defined goals.
iii	With prompting and direct support from a mentor, assists the YYA in identifying basic personal supports, information, and available community resources.	With minimal guidance from a mentor, works alongside YYA to explore, select, and connect with relevant supports, information, and community resources.	Independently supports YYA with identifying and strengthening connections to supports, information, and community resources.
iv	Practices basic listening skills, such as paying attention when a YYA speaks, though may occasionally interrupt or share personal experiences instead of keeping the focus on the YYA.	Consistently listens to YYAs without interrupting or redirecting, using active listening techniques like nodding, summarizing, and reflecting back key points.	Moves beyond active listening mechanics to intentionally hold space for the YYA's stories, ensuring that they feel supported and deeply heard and that their stories are centered.
v	With direct mentor support, seeks initial consent before sharing personal stories; tends to focus on personal experience rather than its relevance or benefit to the YYA; and requires mentor prompting to observe and respond to YYA cues.	With periodic mentor guidance, seeks consent before self-disclosure; attempts to align stories with YYA needs; and adapts disclosure in response to direct YYA feedback, though still relying on mentor support to catch subtle cues or address power dynamics.	Seeks ongoing consent before and during self-disclosure; assesses whether sharing is relevant and beneficial to the YYA; and adapts or stops disclosure based on the YYA's preferences and responses, while minimizing power dynamics and prioritizing the YYA's needs over personal interest.
vi	Strives to set aside personal judgment when a YYA makes choices they disagree with, working to honor their rights, dignity, and current situation but still struggling to manage initial critical reactions or the urge to give unsolicited advice.	Demonstrates respect, acceptance, and understanding in daily interactions with a YYA, but occasionally falls back into judgment when they disagree with YYA's choices.	Shows YYA respect, acceptance, and understanding without judgment, making sure their rights, dignity, and current situation are respected and valued regardless of the choices they make or challenges they face.
vii	Identifies YYA distress, environmental safety concerns, or crisis warning signs, but hesitates or requires guidance on how to respond and follow safety protocols or help the YYA engage their safety plan.	Recognizes YYA distress, environmental safety concerns, or crisis warning signs and responds by following basic safety protocols, though still developing confidence in helping the YYA fully engage their safety plan and coping strategies.	Recognizes and responds to YYA distress, environmental safety concerns, or crisis warning signs by following established safety protocols and supporting the YYA to engage their safety plan and coping strategies.

Professional Behavior

Domain V: Professional Behavior			
	Level 1 (Emerging) Evidence Criteria	Level 2 (Developing)	Level 3 (Proficient)
	Evidence Criteria	Evidence Criteria	Evidence Criteria
i	With reminders or support from a mentor, recognizes personal emotional triggers and uses basic coping strategies to stay calm during challenging interactions with YYA, YYA's support networks, or colleagues.	Demonstrates increasing independence in recognizing personal emotional triggers and using coping strategies to maintain composure during high-stress situations with YYA, YYA's support networks, or colleagues, though occasionally still relies on mentor support.	Maintains professional composure even during high-stress or challenging situations with YYA, YYA's professional and personal support network, or colleagues.
ii	Identifies local organizations, programs, or professional resources that offer services and opportunities for YYA, requiring guidance or prompting from a mentor to begin making initial contacts.	Reaches out to and builds relationships with professional contacts to expand services and opportunities for YYA, but relies on mentor support to maintain these connections over time or navigate complex outreach.	Independently trives toward building and maintaining a professional network to expand services and opportunities for YYA.
iii	Communicates or makes plans on behalf of the young person rather than with them, requiring guidance or prompting from a mentor to share decision-making power and treat the young person as an equal partner.	Engages the young person as an equal partner to align care decisions with their self-guided goals during 1:1 interactions, but relies on mentor support when collaborating with broader multidisciplinary teams and advocates.	Recognizes and engages the young person being served as an equal partner and collaborates with multidisciplinary team members and advocates to ensure all care decisions reflect the self-guided goals of the young person.
iv	Participates in supervision or coaching when scheduled, but requires guidance or prompting from a mentor to reflect on practice, share challenges, or identify areas for professional growth.	Independently brings everyday workplace challenges to supervision and reflects on their practice, but needs mentor prompting to work through complex problem-solving or structure a long-term professional development plan.	Seeks and uses supervision or coaching to reflect on practice, address challenges, solve problems, and support ongoing professional growth.
v	Participates in guided reflection with a mentor to identify personal strengths and growth areas, requiring ongoing prompting to map these insights into a professional development plan or connect them to continuing education opportunities.	Identifies personal strengths and growth areas and creates a personal professional development plan, but relies on mentor support to select or complete targeted continuing education opportunities.	Creates a personal professional development plan by mapping out their current strengths and growth areas, and uses it to complete targeted continuing education opportunities.
vi	Responds to mistakes or feedback with initial defensiveness or hesitation, requiring guidance and support from a mentor to reflect on practice, accept feedback constructively, and identify areas for growth.	Reflects on practice, recognizes mistakes, and seeks support when needed, but relies on mentor support to process and respond constructively to complex or critical feedback.	Consistently demonstrates a growth mindset by reflecting on their practice, seeking support when needed, recognizing mistakes and areas for growth, and responding constructively to feedback.

Professional Behavior (continued)

Domain V: Professional Behavior (continued)			
	Level 1 (Emerging) Evidence Criteria	Level 2 (Developing)	Level 3 (Proficient)
	Evidence Criteria	Evidence Criteria	Evidence Criteria
vii	Expresses ideas respectfully, but requires mentor prompting to respond to messages in a timely manner and guidance to select appropriate communication tools, draft clear written communications, or organize presentations.	Responds to messages in a timely manner, drafts clear emails, and selects appropriate tools for routine situations, but relies on mentor support for complex documentation, formal group presentations, or adapting tone for varied audiences.	Demonstrates professional communication skills by: a) Expressing ideas clearly, respectfully, and appropriately across verbal, written, and digital channels. b) Drafting clear, accurate emails and workplace documentation. c) Delivering organized information and presentations to individuals and groups. d) Responding to messages in a timely manner according to workplace standards. e) Selecting the appropriate communication tool, technology, and tone for different audiences and situations.

Advocacy & Social Justice

Domain VI: Advocacy & Social Justice			
	Level 1 (Emerging) Evidence Criteria	Level 2 (Developing)	Level 3 (Proficient)
	Evidence Criteria	Evidence Criteria	Evidence Criteria
i	Shares personal lived experience with a mentor during reflection, requiring guidance or prompting to connect those experiences to youth-centered improvements in program decision-making or service delivery.	Uses their unique lived experience to identify and propose youth-centered improvements, but relies on mentor support to structure or formally advocate for those changes in program decision-making and service delivery settings.	Independently uses their unique lived experience to advocate for youth-centered improvements in program decision-making and service delivery.
ii	Recognizes the power of Lived Experience Expertise during mentor discussions, but still requires guidance or prompting to connect individual experiences to broader systems or recognize opportunities for systemic advocacy.	With increasing independence, recognizes how the role of Lived Experience Expertise can advance systemic change and shares their perspective in internal discussions.	Recognizes how the role of Lived Experience Expertise can advance systemic change and uses their perspective to provide advocacy, testimony, or support when opportunities arise.
iii	Recognizes basic YYA rights in daily practice, but requires mentor guidance or prompting to identify the relevant laws (such as ADA, HIPAA, or Olmstead) and legal resources needed to protect those rights.	Recognizes when YYA rights are not being respected and applies basic knowledge of relevant laws in routine situations, but relies on mentor support to ensure rights are upheld in challenging circumstances.	Uses knowledge of relevant rights and laws and legal resources (ADA, HIPAA, Olmstead, etc.) to ensure that YYA's rights are respected.
iv	Identifies the specific role, ethics, or outcomes of Youth Peer Support during mentor discussions, requiring structured support to explain these concepts to non-peer colleagues or multidisciplinary team members.	With increasing independence, explains the role, ethics, and outcomes of Youth Peer Support to non-peer colleagues and multidisciplinary team members.	Educates non-peer colleagues and multidisciplinary team members on the specific role, ethics, and outcomes of Youth Peer Support to ensure integrated and respectful care.
v	Demonstrates an understanding of the definitions of systemic oppression and bias, but requires mentor support and prompting to identify where these dynamics appear in youth-serving systems.	Independently identifies systemic oppression and bias within youth-serving systems, but relies on guidance on how to advocate for equitable, culturally responsive support for YYA.	Identifies systemic oppression and bias within youth-serving systems and strives to advocate for equitable, culturally responsive support for YYA.
vi	Demonstrates basic awareness of stigma surrounding mental health, trauma, identity, addiction, or other life challenges, but requires mentor support and prompting to connect these challenges to systemic racism and intersecting forms of oppression.	Analyzes how systemic racism and intersecting forms of oppression exacerbate stigma surrounding mental health, trauma, identity, addiction, and other life challenges, but relies onguidance to translate that analysis into active participation in efforts to dismantle prejudice and discrimination.	Actively participates in efforts to dismantle prejudice and discrimination by analyzing how systemic racism and intersecting forms of oppression exacerbate stigma surrounding mental health, trauma, identity, addiction, and other life challenges.
vii	Expresses an understanding that YYA should be treated as equals and that their rights must be respected, but has not yet begun explicitly partnering with YYA or speaking up for youth choices.	Partners with youth as equals and advocates for youth choices in routine service settings.	Practices solidarity by partnering with youth as equals and advocating for youth choices and rights across service settings.

These YPSS Youth Apprenticeship competencies were co-designed with dedicated partners across New Mexico. Future Focus Education extends our deep gratitude to these collaborators:



- Central New Mexico Community College (CNM)
- CNM Ingenuity
- Coalition for a Safer Albuquerque
- El Puente de Encuentros
- FYI +1
- Jemez Valley Public Schools
- New Mexico Department of Health
- New Mexico Highlands University Center for Excellence in Social Work
- New Mexico Public Education Department
- New Mexico State University (NMSU) Center of Innovation
- NMSU School of Social Work
- UNM Master of Social Work Program
- Technology Leadership High School

We also acknowledge and honor the critical contributions of the New Mexico Youth Behavioral Health Council—a group hosted by Future Focused Education, supported by PAYA, and composed of 14 youth representing 10 NM counties—as well as youth in our Behavioral Health Pre-Apprenticeship program. Both groups played a vital role in designing this apprenticeship.



Have questions or want to dig deeper into YPSS Youth Apprenticeship? With backgrounds in education and social work, we love collaborating. Let's connect!

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