



Advocacy

for Young People & Their Families

YAP's Advocate Model represents a form of paid mentoring that is unique and distinct. In the context of high risk youth and families served, Advocates serve as mentors but also do much more. The Advocate purposefully devotes time to address the youth and family's needs in a number of important life domains.

YAP's key direct services staff person, Advocates, are paid, culturally competent community members who provide intensive services and supports to youth and families. *Advocates are the linchpin of the YAP services model, the glue of the family team*, working to help implement plan goals and objectives. Advocates work directly with the youth, his family and others who are important to the youth – a teacher, a coach, a girlfriend or a best friend.

Advocacy in the YAP context is formal, intensive and structured and includes the ability to meet at times and places most needed by the family. The service averages six months.

Advocate Overview

- Recruited from the same neighborhood and community as our families
- Work intensively in the home and community with the family on their plan
- Know of and can connect families with community supports
- Available 24/7

Effective Matching with Youth

In an unpublished internal study conducted by the University of Albany and YAP:

- 90% of the advocates from our juvenile justice programs nationwide report sharing a common ethnic or cultural identity;
- 84% sharing interests in sports, music or hobbies; and
- 80% raised in the same type of community, for most of the youth they worked with.

Because advocates and youth are from the same communities and because they spend considerable time together each week, they develop relationships that foster trust and openness. Advocates are available 24/7. This level of supervision and support assures caseworkers, judges and PO's that safety and risk factors will be addressed.

A Culturally Competent Approach to Matching

YAP recruits a mix of professionals and paraprofessionals ("GED's to Ph.D.'s") to fulfill the role as "natural helper." YAP employs a zip code recruitment strategy and advocates are matched with youth from the same neighborhoods. These practices promote cultural competence as well as knowledge of community needs, assets and strengths. Other factors guiding the match include compatibility with youth interests and vocational aspirations. Advocates are also to be fluent in the same language as the youth they serve.

Advocate in Action

Within 24 hours of referral to our Chicago program, the Director completed the intake process with the youth, learning that he had interests in pursuing a GED, learning culinary skills and getting back in contact with his incarcerated father. The youth faced many challenges, including a history of violent behaviors and living with an aunt who was resentful of having to care for him. The Director found an Advocate interested in culinary arts and assigned this advocate to work with him. Within weeks, the Advocate got the client enrolled in GED courses at a local community college which also had a culinary arts program, helped him reconnect with his father and found supported work doing construction. The Advocate spent time with the aunt and learned that her resentment in caring for the youth stemmed from the financial strain it was causing. The Advocate helped the aunt resolve some financial issues by showing her how her TANF check can go further by avoiding fast food restaurants and shopping smartly. Because transportation was an issue, the Advocate took the aunt to the grocery store and cooked a meal for her, teaching her how to buy food that could stretch for a whole week. Over time, the Advocate introduced the aunt to a neighbor that was able to transport her to the store, ensuring that this need would be met post discharge from YAP. The Advocate also focused on working with the youth on how to resolve issues without resorting to violence by sharing with him his own experiences and practicing new ways to find peaceful resolutions to conflict.

Advocate as “Credible Messengers”

YAP’s hiring and matching practices promote Advocates as “credible messengers” to their families and within the community. Staff become much needed positive role models for youth and their families, demonstrating that there are options and opportunities for them that they may not have previously considered. Because advocates know the community and may have been previously involved in the system and learned from that experience, the youth and families relate well with the advocate. Their willingness to do “whatever it takes” to assist the young person including serving in a variety of roles (e.g., transporter, conflict intervener, life skills trainer, respite provider, tutor) enhances acceptance and youth engagement.

Advocate Activities

- **Strengthen Family Relationships:** Work with the parents/caregivers, siblings and the youth together and separately
- **Skill Development:** Engage youth and families in problem solving and skill building through coaching, modeling and curricula such as Ansell E. Casey Life Skills
- **Connection with Community Supports:** Based on needs and interest, connect families with pro-social people, places and activities
- **Formal and Informal Group Work:** Advocates work with youth in small informal groups and to deliver curricula, such as the SAMSHA approved evidence-based “Peaceful Alternatives to Tough Situations”
- **Employment and Job Training:** Pre-employment work on resume, interviewing skills, dress, how to job search; assistance in securing a job; engage youth with a “Supported Work” as job coaches, available on site for the youth and the business owner
- **Academic Support:** Work with parents to identify the most appropriate educational environment; assistance in enrolling in school; communication with the school; attend meetings with parents at the school

What Is Supported Work?

Supported employment is a component of the YAP model that subsidizes wages to pay youth to work in local businesses, assist local charities or perform in-house services within YAP. Supported work is transitional employment, averaging 3 months, targeted for youth not yet ready for outside employment, to work in a safe structured environment with his advocate. It provides the young person with money to pay back restitution or fines, financial help to assist his family and enough cash to hopefully deter him from returning to illegal activity. Supported work also helps local businesses with funding for entry-level staff positions at little or no cost.