

HUD Cohort 5 100-Day Challenge Case Study

Jacksonville, FL: Youth-Focused Staff Positions

Jacksonville leveraged the momentum of the 100-Day Challenge to develop new youth-focused staff positions to respond to gaps within the homeless response system and to improve authentic youth and young adult (YYA) collaboration, outreach, and engagement efforts.

HOW JACKSONVILLE MADE IT HAPPEN

Jacksonville set out from Day 1 of the 100-Day Challenge to increase local capacity for engaging and identifying youth and young adults (YYA) experiencing homelessness. The 100-Day Challenge Team focused on ways to build this capacity through peer-led supports and opportunities for YYA with lived experience and established a commitment to ensuring that any new positions would properly compensate YYA for their time and expertise. Through lessons learned during the 100-Day Challenge about gaps in the current youth homelessness response system, two new youth-focused staff positions were created in Jacksonville: YYA Advocates and a Youth Coordinated Entry System (CES) Intake Specialist.

Four YYA with lived experience were recruited and hired to serve on a Youth and Young Adult Action Committee (YAAC), which operates as a formal committee of the CoC Board. YAAC members hold positions as YYA Advocates and are compensated at living-wage hourly rates for their work dedicated to increasing authentic YYA collaboration, outreach, and engagement throughout the community. YYA Advocates use a variety of strategies to conduct outreach to YYA experiencing homelessness and refer them to partner agencies to be assessed and connected to resources. Peer outreach methods have been particularly important for engaging YYA with diverse experiences and backgrounds in housing and services, including YYA who are LGBTQIA+ and/or survivors of human trafficking.

Jacksonville also developed and filled a new Youth CES Intake Specialist position during the 100-Day Challenge. This staff person dedicates approximately half their time to identifying and assessing YYA through the local CES. The Youth Intake Specialist is able to conduct VI-SPDAT assessments for YYA over the phone or in-person at youth-serving agencies across Jacksonville, including for YYA referred by agencies such as local schools that do not currently participate in HMIS.

Key Takeaways:

- Youth-focused staff positions can increase local capacity for outreaching, engaging, and identifying YYA experiencing homelessness.
- Youth-focused staffing and hiring practices should be centered in equity and should include outreach and recruitment to persons with lived experiences of youth homelessness.
- Professional positions and spaces for YYA advocates can help increase the effectiveness of peer-led outreach and engagement activities.
- Youth-focused staff positions held by persons with lived experiences of youth homelessness should be supported with professional development opportunities and living wage compensation.
- Youth-focused staff positions should be developed in collaboration with YYA to respond to gaps in the current homeless response system.

This new position has helped increase the number of YYA who are connected to CES in Jacksonville and has resulted in quicker referrals to housing and services for YYA experiencing homelessness. Jacksonville's new YYA Advocate and Youth CES Intake Specialist positions helped build out local capacity to conduct YYA-dedicated outreach, engagement, identification, and referral processes and increase successful housing placements during and beyond the 100-Day Challenge.

LESSONS LEARNED

1) Make Decisions Regarding Staffing and Hiring Practices with an Equity Focus

Jacksonville committed to looking at the outcomes of their 100-Day Challenge through a racial equity lens, including efforts to increase the capacity of the youth homeless response system through youth-focused staffing and hiring practices. The 100-Day Challenge Team worked to center the most vulnerable YYA experiencing homelessness in their work, including planning for how new staff positions can help address inequities in accessing housing and services experienced by Black and Indigenous Youth of Color and LGBTQIA+ YYA. The Team was also conscientious and deliberate in ensuring a diverse recruitment process and equitable hiring practices for youth-focused staff positions. This focus on equity in staffing and hiring practices has helped Jacksonville ensure that new and ongoing staffing efforts reflect the experiences and needs of the YYA clients being served.

2) Create Professional Spaces for YYA Engagement and Collaboration

Jacksonville recognized the importance of not only engaging YYA with lived experience in the 100-Day Challenge, but also opening professional spaces for YYA to consistently and equitably participate in the community's ongoing youth homelessness efforts. The Jacksonville 100-Day Challenge Team was committed to developing a structure for YYA outreach and engagement that was supported by professional development opportunities and appropriate living wage compensation. The 100-Day Challenge Team worked with YYA with lived experiences of homelessness to help develop job descriptions, membership agreements, and a living-wage compensation plan for the new YYA Advocate positions. The YYA Advocate positions were also intentionally designed to give YYA with lived experience authentic power in decision-making processes, with YYA Advocates informing decisions made by the Continuum of Care (CoC) by serving on the Young Adult Action Committee (YAAC) of the CoC Board.

3) Identify Gaps and Challenges that Can Be Addressed through Youth-Focused Staffing Efforts

The Jacksonville 100-Day Challenge Team designed new youth-focused staff positions around gaps and challenges in the homeless response system identified by key stakeholders, including YYA with lived experiences of homelessness, homeless service providers, and system leaders. Four YYA Advocate positions were developed in response to an identified need for more authentic YYA collaboration and engagement in addressing youth homelessness in Jacksonville, including the need for peer-led outreach and engagement to YYA not already connected to the homeless response system. The development of a Youth Coordinated Entry Intake Specialist was in response to barriers identified by 100-Day Challenge Team members in engaging, identifying, and assessing YYA experiencing homelessness through the existing Coordinated Entry System. The Youth Intake Specialist has helped address these barriers by dedicating time and effort to meeting YYA experiencing homelessness in their environment and providing in-person and phone assessments that allow them to be quickly connected to Coordinated Entry and referred for housing and resources. The Youth Intake Specialist role has also evolved to respond to new challenges and needs over time. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Youth Intake Specialist was involved in helping to build a basic assessment that could be used to identify YYAs who were at a higher risk of complications from COVID-19 and prioritize them for housing resources.

4) Recruit and Support Persons with Lived Experiences of Youth Homelessness to Serve in Youth-Focused Staff Positions

The Jacksonville 100-Day Challenge Team understood the importance of lived expertise in serving YYA experiencing homelessness and made a dedicated effort to outreach to and recruit persons with lived experiences of youth homelessness to help fill new youth-focused staff positions. Recruitment efforts for the four YYA Advocate positions were conducted through the 100-Day Challenge Team's partner network, including recruitment of one YYA member of the 100-Day Challenge Team who was engaged in the Challenge from the beginning. Additionally, the person hired to serve as the new Coordinated Entry Youth Intake Specialist for Jacksonville was recruited through a 100-Day Challenge Team member and has lived experience of youth homelessness. It was important that Jacksonville's new YYA Advocate and Youth Intake Specialist positions were supported beyond compensation, including through professional development opportunities, trainings, and access to professional tools needed to effectively do their work, such as cell phones and work computers. Jacksonville found that investing in youth-focused staff positions that are filled by persons with lived experience of youth homelessness has improved the community's ability to identify and serve YYA in need of housing and services.