



PEER SUPPORT SPECIALIST APPRENTICESHIP

IFOSTER'S REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP FOR PROFESSIONAL CAREERS IN HEALTHCARE & SOCIAL SERVICES



BUILDING HEALTHCARE & SOCIAL SERVICE CAREERS

iFoster's apprenticeship program for TAY (transition-age foster youth) provides professional job skills training, Medicaid certification, on-the-job training and case management work experience for current and former foster, and system- involved youth. Anchored in iFoster's jobs program, which has been evaluated by the Administration for Children and Family Services as a promising practice for foster youth employment, iFoster's registered apprenticeship is a paid workforce development program that is a proven stepping stone to careers in healthcare and social services sectors.

This program provides:

- 2,000 hours of paid training and work experience in healthcare and social services fields
- Essential job skills training
- Medicaid Peer Support Specialist certification
- Job shadowing of Medicaid Lead Case Managers
- Scaffolded work experience over 1,700 hours to achieve Lead Case Manager capabilities
- Professional development and peer mentors
- Wrap-around supportive services to address employment barriers and support graduation
- Employment placement services

Youth participants are paired with a peer mentor who case manages them through the program, providing guidance, coaching, and supportive services as needed to ensure graduation. As a result, 92% of youth participants graduated over the last 6 program years.

Only 8% of foster youth achieve a college degree in their lifetime. This program enables them to achieve healthcare and social service careers through a supportive pathway with financial assistance where they gain skills, paraprofessional certification (billable under Medicaid) and experience that employers value.

The program's professional development work experience model has won Best New AmeriCorps program at its launch in 2019 and an Excellence in AmeriCorps award in 2023. The program hires, trains, and deploys current and former foster, system involved, and disconnected youth to support their peers and other vulnerable populations by connecting them to resources that enable them to achieve key life goals of health and well-being, employment, education, and self-sufficiency.

The program has graduated over 700 foster youth, with 87% earning permanent employment and/or pursuing post-secondary education.

In 2024, peer mentor interns provided 24,758 transition-age youth with support across 4 states.

CRITICAL SHORTAGE OF HEALTH WORKERS

According to data from KFF, 47% of the U.S. population in 2022 was living in a mental health workforce shortage area, with some states requiring up to 700 more practitioners to remove this designation.

To help address this critical shortage, and in recognition of research that demonstrates that peers supporting peers is a highly impactful intervention, SAMSHA created paraprofessional jobs with career tracks into mental health services, social services, and health care fields. Paraprofessional jobs such as Medicaid-certified Peer Support Specialist, Lead Case Manager and Community Health Worker leverage lived experience with mental health and substance abuse to deploy trained professionals to help their peers connect to the resources and services they need to achieve self-sufficiency.

iFoster's Peer Support Specialist Apprenticeship is designed to achieve the goals of meeting the mental health needs of local communities by providing needed capacity as well as providing pathways to good quality careers through work experience and professional development while earning financial support.

MEDICAID CERTIFICATION, TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE

- Apprentices undergo core training covering basic jobs skills training focused on development of critical soft skills with an emphasis on effective communication with clients, with peers as service colleagues, with supervisors, with clinic staff, and with other stakeholders; Healthcare 101 and Healthcare Career Exploration; and self-care training on dealing with and managing secondary trauma.
- Apprentices complete state-based Peer Support Specialist training and pass the state exam to become Medicaid-certified.
- Apprentices learn to be Lead Care Managers delivering Enhanced Care Management services by supporting their peers as they exit foster care and strive to achieve self-sufficiency.
- Apprentices work in their communities at local CBOs, and FQHCs augmenting the capacity of these organizations to provide care coordination and enhanced case management services.

- Apprentices are provided with direct supervision from managers who have experience working with, supervising, and coaching disconnected youth.
- Apprentices receive weekly coaching and professional development training in healthcare basics and 6 competency areas: self-efficacy and leadership; communications, social, and professional skills; financial literacy; community network; education planning; and career exploration.
- Apprentices are supported by Medicaid-certified Peer Support Specialists (peer mentors) to ensure they are meeting their scheduled commitments and who can provide them with the resources and supportive services they need to overcome any employment barriers they face.
- Apprentices are provided with employment placement services at the end of their work experience term. As they are Medicaid-certified, iFoster helps employers subsidize their permanent employment through Medicaid billing of their case management and peer support services.

