

# Integrating Peer Supports into Services for Homeless Youth with a Child Welfare History: Lessons from the Field

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**Lighthouse Youth & Family Services (Lighthouse) is dedicated to empowering young people and families to succeed through a continuum of care that promotes healing and growth.** The organization is nationally recognized as an innovator in services for families in crisis, for homeless youth and young adults, and for youth learning to become self-sufficient. Lighthouse headquarters are in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Lighthouse received a 2-year planning grant in 2013 from the Children’s Bureau within the Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) as part of the Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) grant program. The purpose of YARH is to build the evidence base on comprehensive service models that prevent homelessness among older youth and young adults who have been involved with the child welfare system. The work conducted during the first phase contributed to ACF selecting Lighthouse in 2015 to be one of six organizations to proceed to the second phase of YARH, an initial implementation grant.

*This brief describes key staff positions within the **Watch Me Rise** comprehensive service model developed and implemented by Lighthouse. WMR incorporated the **High Fidelity Wraparound** service coordination process to serve homeless young adults (youth) who had previously been involved in child welfare. Two key staff roles in WMR were the Wraparound Facilitator and the peer-based Youth Support Advocate. This brief describes the role of each position within WMR and how staff in the two positions collaborated to deliver a model that is trauma-informed, youth-driven, strengths-based, and goal-oriented.*

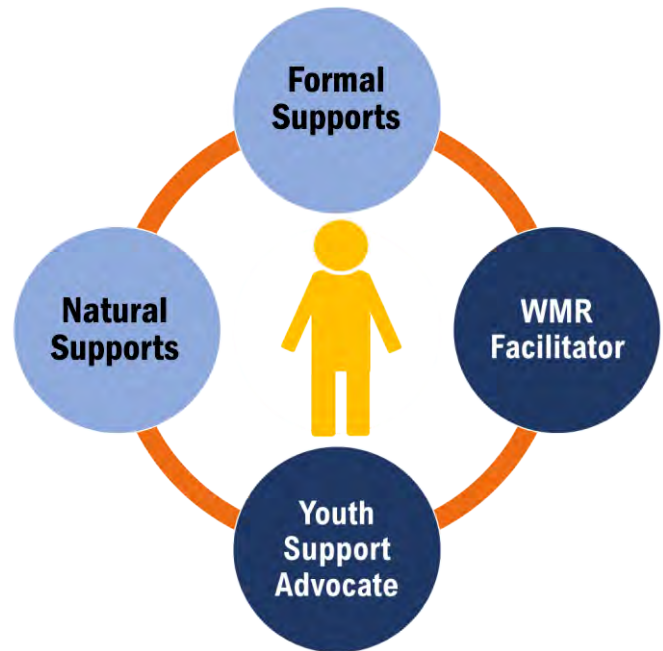
## Overview of the Model

Lighthouse used the defining principles and four phases of **High Fidelity Wraparound (Wraparound)** to develop the **Watch Me Rise (WMR)** comprehensive service model.<sup>1</sup> WMR focused on preventing recurring homelessness among young adults (“youth”) ages 18-24 who have a child welfare history. Youth were primarily identified and referred through the Lighthouse Sheakley Center for Youth when they entered as homeless shelter residents. However, they could also be referred by the county’s aftercare program for youth who have emancipated from child welfare. Youth remained enrolled in WMR after they exited shelter or aftercare services; the program typically lasted 6-18 months depending on the unique needs of each youth. WMR incorporates Wraparound to help youth develop a sense of **connected autonomy**<sup>2</sup> in order to prevent future homelessness for youth with a foster care history. The service model aimed to:

- 1) **Help youth identify their own goals and needs, and**
- 2) **Develop a team of formal and natural supports with each youth in order to help the youth achieve their goals, find and maintain stable housing, and prevent future homelessness.**

## Essential WMR Staff Positions

WMR put the client at the center of their care. The team-based approach to helping youth achieve the goals outlined in their Plan of Care was a critical component of WMR. The **WMR Team** was comprised of natural supports drawn from the youth's own networks of interpersonal relationships, and formal supports drawn from the youth's service providers. Although WMR Team members were considered the primary source of long-term support to the youth during and after the program, WMR intervention staff were essential for building these supportive connections and guiding the youth through the Plan of Care process. A **WMR Facilitator** and **Youth Support Advocate** worked directly with each youth and their WMR Team throughout each phase of the program.



### WMR Facilitator

A WMR Facilitator was a youth's first and primary point of contact when they enrolled in the program. The Facilitator was responsible for implementing the core components of WMR, including the four phases of Wraparound and managing the youth's WMR Team. The Facilitator aimed to build youth self-efficacy and autonomy through activities that support the development and implementation of an individualized Plan of Care. The Facilitator helped the youth and their WMR Team to develop plans and make decisions based on the youth's goals while ensuring all opinions were heard and considered. The Facilitator also managed conflict and provided feedback to the WMR Team so they could monitor their progress and adjust as needed. Guided by the WMR Facilitator, the process aimed to enhance the relationships between Team members so that everyone learned new skills about communication, participation, and the importance of supportive relationships. The goal was to build connections, resources, and protective factors that served as an ongoing safety net that lasts beyond the youth's time in the program.

### WMR Facilitator in Action

- WMR Facilitators had 12-16 cases, most of which were in the second or third phase of Wraparound because those phases are the longest. Combined, these phases can last 4-15 months as youth work through developing and implementing their Plan of Care.
- This position requires a flexible schedule that may require early mornings, evenings and weekends.
- WMR Facilitators must have current automobile insurance and a valid driver's license because they often meet with youth in their home or a community-based setting. They may also assist with transporting youth as part of activities identified in the Plan of Care.
- The ideal Facilitator should respect youth voice and choice and be able to build trust and rapport.
- The ideal Facilitator should have a non-clinical background. It may be difficult for a clinically trained staff member to adapt to the philosophy, approach, and documentation of WMR (e.g. writing case notes focused on strengths and unmet needs rather than diagnosis).

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## Youth Support Advocate (YSA)

The Youth Support Advocate (YSA) was responsible for the promotion of youth voice throughout WMR activities. The YSA provided the youth with peer support and coaching on life skills activities and Plan of Care goals, as well as helping youth prepare for their WMR Team meetings. The YSA advocated for the youth in WMR Team meetings, assisted with getting youth to participate in community and organizational leadership opportunities, and provided support based on mutual respect. The YSA was not responsible for setting Plan of Care goals and strategies but served as a resource so that they could be attained.

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*“Sort of like being like a professional friend, just whatever a real good friend would do while still keeping that professional boundary is what you do. For example, if someone was having trouble self-starting, you would try and motivate them according to what fits them in their culture. You have to think about just meeting someone where they are and whatever that problem is in the best way... And then there's also that power of relatability.”*

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Youth who enrolled in WMR were not automatically assigned a YSA upon enrollment because it was important to give adequate time for the WMR Facilitator to build a relationship with the youth first. Additionally, youth chose whether they wanted to add a YSA to their WMR Team. We found that youth were more receptive to adding the YSA if the YSA became familiar to them by playing a support role during Wraparound activities (e.g. as a notetaker). This strategy seemed to allow the youth-YSA relationship to develop more naturally and mimicked the development of informal personal relationships.

### Youth Support Advocate in Action

- The YSA position was similar to the Peer Support Specialist within traditional Wraparound. WMR initially set out to hire *young adults* with lived experience of child welfare and/or homelessness but they were not applying for the position. Barriers included not possessing a valid driver's license, adequate car insurance, and their own vehicle – all of which were required for the YSA position. Conversations with the Lighthouse Youth Advisory Council members also revealed that young adults did not think they had enough experience to work in a professional setting to help other youth through adversities and instability that they may still be experiencing themselves. We revised the position to the YSA to expand recruitment of older individuals who experienced trauma but had more time to gain perspective and healing.
- The ideal YSA should have a lived experience related to child welfare, juvenile justice and/or mental health systems or experienced homelessness at some point in their life.
- The YSA must be comfortable sharing parts of their own story in order to build trust, rapport, and relatability. They should be able to convey their story in a way that shows healing is possible.
- Starting salaries for YSAs should provide wages that are consistent with comparable salaries for entry-level direct support workers. Wages should ensure YSAs can afford to meet their basic needs so that financial stress does not hinder the process of advocating for WMR youth.
- The YSA should be a full-time position. This reduces the likelihood that a YSA will have to work more than one job, which makes them more available to the flexible schedules and emerging needs of the youth served in WMR. Full-time employment also provides health insurance and other benefits that can support emerging leaders within professional fields that have served them. It may also help to prevent staff turnover.

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## Collaboration Between Staff Positions

The WMR Facilitator and YSA staff collaborated with each other to benefit the youth and their progress within the program. Although the positions were responsible for assisting youth in different ways, they were both grounded in Wraparound principles and values. This common foundation helped move the Wraparound process forward during WMR while providing a more comprehensive approach to service delivery.

In discussing how the two positions worked together, WMR Facilitators and YSAs described informal exchanges that were mutually beneficial and helped them in their shared pursuit to help youth build stability, self-efficacy, and social connectedness for continued success after the program. WMR Facilitators and YSAs often worked together outside of WMR Team meetings and staff meetings to coordinate services and brainstorm ideas for effectively working with each youth. During the collaborative process they shared new unmet needs that were identified while working with a youth so that the needs could be addressed in a WMR Team meeting or within YSA coaching activities. They also coordinated to provide opportunities for youth to naturally connect with the staff member who is the best fit, which required the other person to pull back so that the youth could progress.

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*“[YSAs] are just really good at stepping in because as a Facilitator we try to stay neutral. But they have the advocacy and the words to help support the young person because [the youth] may be intimidated when that pushback [from the WMR Team] comes back or...they may not have the words to say it. Part of Watch Me Rise is to help the Team members and family members see [the youth] differently.”*

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### Collaboration in Action

WMR Facilitators and YSAs were supervised and coached by the **Operations Manager** who had expertise in Wraparound. The Operations Manager strongly encouraged and fostered collaboration among Facilitators and YSAs, which influenced their willingness to work together and learn from each other. Furthermore, staff reported that this contributed to a sense of professional peer support which helped them in their respective positions. They also thought it promoted equity between the two positions.

### Lessons Learned: Youth Involvement in Staff Hiring

Youth enrolled in WMR offered valuable insight into identifying WMR Facilitator and YSA candidates who would be successful in the positions; therefore, Lighthouse invited youth to participate as interviewers in the hiring of new WMR staff. Youth who were invited to be interviewers had to be actively involved or graduated from WMR and have a clear understanding of the staff roles. Multiple youth were included to ensure diverse perspectives. A list of questions was provided and the Operations Manager prepared the youth with clear instructions on how to conduct an interview. Youth were also coached on strategic sharing (not disclosing personal information) and the Operations Manager supported youth during the interview, including re-direction to keep the interview focus on track. Youth reported that they enjoyed being part of the hiring process and benefitted from witnessing the hiring process. They thought the experience would help them in future interviews where they are a job candidate.

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A WMR Intervention Manual has been prepared and contains additional details about the comprehensive service model, evaluation findings, and recommendations for the implementation of WMR. For more information about the WMR program, contact Victoria Ackman at [vackman@lys.org](mailto:vackman@lys.org)

The University of Cincinnati Institute for Policy Research provided research and evaluation services throughout the project, which contributed to the development and implementation of WMR. For more information about the evaluation, contact Dr. Robin Lindquist-Grantz, [lindqurn@uc.edu](mailto:lindqurn@uc.edu)

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To learn more about the YARH grantees, including the work they completed in Phase I, please visit:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/building-capacity-to-evaluate-interventions-for-youth-with-child-welfare-involvement-at-risk-of-homelessness>

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<sup>1</sup>WMR and the four phases of Wraparound are described in more detail in: Dickerscheid, R., Houchin, C. Lindquist-Grantz, R., & Downing, K., (2020). *Using Wraparound with Homeless Youth Who Have a Child Welfare History: Lessons from the Field* (Issue Brief No. 2).

<sup>2</sup>Goodkind, S., Schelbe, L. A., & Shook, J. J. (2011). Why youth leave care: Understandings of adulthood and transition successes and challenges among youth aging out of child welfare. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 33, 1039-1048. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.01.0

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