

The Why

Iowa faces unique challenges in connecting youth aging out of foster care to services and supports. Not all eligible youth utilize aftercare services. Youth Connect AmeriCorps (YCA) is designed to assist agencies and organizations in increasing their youth outreach. In the FY22 [NYTD](#) report for IA, 32.8% of youth aged 19 years formerly in care were not employed or in school. Only 2% had earned a vocational, associate, bachelor, or higher degree. Iowa Aftercare Services Network (IASN) reported that of 151 youth who participated in and exited from services, 88% had a high school credential, and 67% were employed full or part-time by the time of exit.

The How

YCA is a program of Iowa State University's Child Welfare Research and Training Project (CW RTP) that aims to train individuals with lived and learned foster care experience to provide supplementary support for job readiness, education planning, and social-emotional support to their peers. We partner with Volunteer Iowa, YSS, and most recently IASN.

When developing the YCA program, CW RTP engaged a broad array of stakeholders in initial data gathering, analysis, and focused conversations to identify gaps related to child welfare. Program staff met with Iowa stakeholders involved with transitioning youth; connected with Iowa HHS and IASN; and engaged those who have lived and learned experience, including knowledge around authentic youth engagement best practices and training in healing-centered engagement.

The What

YCA program members with lived and learned experience in foster care serve with interested agencies (AmeriCorps host sites) for 10 months, providing supplementary outreach and engagement services to youth transitioning from foster/state care to independent living. Using a healing-centered perspective, members serve alongside agency staff to connect transition-age youth ages 14-23 with educational and job readiness services and social-emotional supports to enhance youths' skills and planning for their futures. AmeriCorps member service activities have the potential to increase referrals to IASN and build opportunities for authentic youth engagement, thereby strengthening youth, staff, and agency success. Members and host sites receive applicable and timely guidance related to AmeriCorps from Iowa State's YCA Program Director, Erika Abusharkh.

Agencies hosting a YCA member benefit from the following: foster care youth receive direct support from a YCA member or members (agencies can host more than one member) who serve alongside and extend the capacity of an agency's staff, with members bringing their lived and learned experience in foster care to their positions. **Iowa communities will gain** well-prepared foster care youth ready to transition to jobs or school

Members benefit from: receiving professional development training, a living stipend, and an education award, setting them up for success in preparation for a career in Iowa's social services workforce.

YCA staff is recruiting members from AMP councils, IASN agencies, and other referrals. The program has funds to place 14 members at 5 to 7 host site agencies statewide.

The Who and When

For the 2023-2024 program year, YCA members begin their AmeriCorps service in October and November 2023 and end their term in July or August 2024. Member recruitment is beginning now. After a two-month training period with YCA staff and host sites, the members engage with and provide additional direct support to foster care youth in the areas of job readiness and educational planning, plus social-emotional skill development.

Members bolster host site capacity around authentic youth engagement to increase collaboration between YCA members with lived experience and host site staff. YCA members have the potential to engage additional foster care youth at community outreach events. These collaborations help shape best practices, supports, programming, and continuous quality improvement through the lens of those most impacted. YCA aims to expand local partnerships to include community-driven solutions that enhance the delivery of connector support and services around the Casey Life Skills assessment for youth who are nearing or recently exited from foster care. Simultaneously, YCA opens opportunities for social service career pathways for members to strengthen the Iowa social services workforce.