



DESIGNING PROGRAMS WITH TAY WELLBEING AT THE CENTER:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PEER NARRATIVE AMBASSADOR FELLOWSHIP

ABOUT THE FELLOWSHIP

In early 2026, the Department of Youth Development (DYD), in partnership with the Arts for Healing and Justice Network (AHJN), launched the Peer Narrative Ambassador Fellowship.

Over the course of four months, the Peer Narrative Ambassadors (PNAs) were paid to explore the history of youth incarceration and justice movements in LA County. The PNAs received professional mentorship to craft personal art projects that reflected their unique visions for youth justice. This experience was documented in a short film and screened at a public event celebrating the PNAs and showcasing their art.

ABOUT THE PEER NARRATIVE AMBASSADORS

All eight Peer Narrative Ambassadors were artists with lived experience of systems involvement with child welfare or juvenile justice systems. The PNAs were all Los Angeles County transition-age youth (TAY) ranging in age from 16-26 years old.



WATCH THE FILM NOW!

The History of Youth Incarceration & Movements for Transformation in Los Angeles County

bit.ly/PNAFilm



PROGRAM DESIGN

This fellowship program was designed with youth well-being at the center, recognizing that young people thrive when programs intentionally support their holistic development, leadership, and long-term stability.

Drawing from **DYD's Research Framework**, we identified 4 key **Domains of Youth Well-being** (out of the 12 total) to map desired outcomes and model the program design around.

DOMAINS OF YOUTH WELL-BEING

DESIRED OUTCOMES "PNAs will..."

PROGRAM DESIGN ELEMENTS

Domain 1: Authentic & Fulfilling Engagement

Subdomain 1.1: Identify & Purpose

Develop a stronger sense of their personal interests, values, & goals

Reflection activities & 1:1 goal-based check ins

Subdomain 1.3: Job & Career Opportunities

Develop professional art skills & gain insight into potential careers

Small group artistic mentorship

Domain 3: Environment for Thriving

Subdomain 3.1: Connection to Culture

Increase their understanding of the histories of communities of color

Culturally relevant educational opportunities

Subdomain 3.2: Sense of Belonging

Develop reciprocal connections with other youth fellows & trusted adults

Hiring mentors who reflect the lived experiences and/or cultural backgrounds of youth participants & encouraging

Learn more about
DYD's Research
Framework at:

dyd.lacounty.gov/data-reports



EVALUATION & OUTCOMES

PNAs were asked to complete pre & post surveys assessing their own well-being by responding to Likert scale & open-ended questions modeled after 5 chosen Subdomains of Youth Well-being.

We saw an overall average increase in self-ranking from the PNAs between their pre-survey in December 2025 to their post-survey in May 2026.

DOMAIN 1: AUTHENTIC & FULFILLING ENGAGEMENT

+38%



Subdomain 1.1: Identity & Purpose

"I trust the vision I hold in what I want to accomplish in life (goals and aspirations)."

Subdomain 1.3 Job & Career Opportunities

"I feel like I have opportunities that help me explore potential careers and skills I want to develop."

"This fellowship taught me how cool it can be to have artists around you. Also, a lot of other people are struggling and I'm not the only one."

"The phone calls, check ins, and a listening ear from the staff were helpful for me, especially since this season has been extremely difficult for me in my personal life."

"Throughout this fellowship I've also gotten better at sharing ideas and working on the way I approach certain things such as not trying to make my art completely perfect, accepting the flaws, and trying to better my skills. My understanding of the juvenile system and its history has also gotten better throughout this fellowship."

DOMAIN 3: ENVIRONMENT FOR THRIVING



Subdomain 3.1: Connection to Culture

"I have an understanding of how youth incarceration has impacted my communities."

Subdomain 3.2: Sense of Belonging

"I feel connected to trusted adults."

Subdomain 3.2: Sense of Belonging

"I feel connected to peers my own age."

LESSONS LEARNED FOR FUTURE TAY PROGRAM DESIGN

Below are program design recommendations for systems-impacted transition-age youth (TAY) based on DYD's experience with the Peer Narrative Ambassador Fellowship.

1

FINANCIAL COMPENSATION

Compensation is key in reducing economic barriers to participation & increasing retention throughout a multi-month long program. Providing stipends or financial compensation that is comparable to a living wage acknowledges the value of youth expertise & participation.

2

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Invest time in authentic relationship-building between youth and adults to foster trust. Successful strategies to build trust can include:

- Hiring consistent staff who reflect the lived experiences and/or cultural backgrounds of youth
- Building out a regular 1:1 check in structure & staff availability for "office hours"
- Icebreaker check-ins & community-building activities

3

WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

Incorporate wraparound supports that recognize and respond to barriers beyond the program itself.

- Transportation assistance
- Full, nutritious meals during meetings or events
- Adult mentorship that is responsive to the unique needs/challenges of each young person (e.g. resume review, accompanying youth to court, etc.)
- Tapping into strong referral networks & ensuring warm handoffs with community-based organizations and service providers

4

PROGRAM FLEXIBILITY

Building flexibility into the program structure recognizes the challenges that systems-impacted TAY are navigating.

This can look like:

- Hybrid or virtual participation options
- Extended deadlines, when possible
- Polling participants on the dates/times/locations that work best for them
- Offering multiple modalities for communication (text, email, phone, group chats, etc.)

5

TRAUMA-INFORMED, HEALING-CENTERED, & RESTORATIVE APPROACHES

Adults working with systems-impacted TAY should strive to cultivate interactions that disrupt the punitive structures that youth may already be facing in other spaces.

- Approaching absences, missed deadlines, or silences with care & curiosity
- Offering opportunities for re-engagement after absences
- Setting clear expectations & non-punitive consequences