Young people are the experts of their own experience, and so much more. They not only hold valuable strategic insights, but also possess essential skills for tackling complex problems that affect them.

At Treehouse, we firmly believe that partnership with young people who have experienced foster care is a critical part of meaningful service delivery and impactful systems change.

From September 2022 through June 2023, Treehouse piloted the Fellowship program as a new, exciting activity for youth-adult partnership. The team is comprised of young adults with lived experience in foster care with the intention to facilitate connections with staff and community partners, create supportive opportunities for professional growth and collaborate on projects and consultation topics across the organization.

To apply for the Fellowship, Treehouse set the following eligibility requirements for applicants:

- 18 to 26 years old
- Reside in Washington State
- Experience in state, tribal or federal foster care
- Ability to commit to a part-time, hybrid position over September 2022 to June 2023

There were 30 total applications for the positions; 25 applicants were interviewed and 8 were hired.
Treehouse Fellowship
Reflections on the 2023 Program Year

The Fellowship pilot centered around:

- The cultivation of a supportive community of practice
- Development of professional skills
- Instigation of meaningful change

“The whole process of working with the fellows/getting to know them has been as invaluable as the outcomes that we are working towards.”

-Treehouse Staff Member

Fellowship at a Glance

Race
- 50% BIPOC
- 25% Non-BIPOC
- 25% Undisclosed

Gender Pronouns
- 50% He
- 38% She
- 12% They/She

Treehouse Program Enrollment
- 63% Current
- 25% Past
- 12% None

Residing County
- 63% King
- 25% Other/Undisclosed
- 12% Snohomish

- Fellows ranged from 20 to 25 years old
- 1 Fellow had parental responsibilities
- 2 Fellows identified as LGBTQIA+

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At the conclusion of the pilot program, the fellows expressed a sense of belonging and supportive community of practice marked by the following:

- Engagement with full-time staff members with lived experience
- Open discussions within the organization
- Intentional introductions and ongoing collaboration
- Connections on a deeper level
- In-person meetings and collaborative opportunities
- Welcoming environment that facilitated self-reflection and encouraged active involvement in discussions and activities

“Pushing myself with my project, learning more about it and being able to share out with the fellows to give them an understanding helps me grasp a better understanding of my project as a whole.”

-2023 Fellow

“It was interesting and helpful to work with the fellows in conjunction with other members of Treehouse to not only better understand what we’re doing but to begin initiating that kind of participation and brainstorming.”

-2023 Fellow

“The people [were helpful] for sure having that support around me to see the genuine respect and effect toward us fellows and a manager that is looking to see growth not in just us as employees but in herself as well. That makes for a better team because we all are a team trying to achieve a common goal, that is the beauty of it.”

-2023 Fellow
Reflections on the 2023 Program Year

Professional Development

The following activities throughout the fellowship were linked with positive development in fellows' orientations toward and capacity within diverse professional pathways:

- Active engagement in department projects
- Support and guidance from project leads
- Training opportunities, such as legislative advocacy and strategic planning
- Networking opportunities
- Collaborative work with internal staff
- Activities with external partners

“(A MarCom staff member) has helped with the writing portion in ways that help me feel like I can approach writing on the topic I chose more authentically. (A Policy team staff member) has shown me that I am not alone in the oppression I faced in placements and group homes and the [foster care to prison] pipeline that people such as us foster youth were designed to reach as a consequence of that.”

-2023 Fellow

“Something that stood out and that was helpful was having the chance to meet the ambassador board after the session.”

-2023 Fellow

“…When we talked about strategy planning, I was able to understand more about what it is and strategically plan [alongside organizational leaders]”

-2023 Fellow
The purpose of the Fellowship is to spark transformative impact at Treehouse, increasing partnership with young lived experts and integrating their voices into all areas of our work. Highly visible partnerships and consistent proximity to young adults with lived experience initiated reflection within the organization, prompting full-time staff to critically examine alignment between stated intentions and actual behaviors.

**Direct impacts to the organization included:**

**Storytelling:**
- Developed the Storyteller Bill of Rights & consent procedures
- Laid the foundation for a compensation guide for partnership with lived experts
- Published blog posts
- Spoke at fundraising and volunteer recruitment events

**Systems change:**
- Facilitated training for staff on systems change theory and practice
- Created more collaborative organizational process for setting the organization’s legislative agenda

**Program design & refinement:**
- Consulted on new services for Special Populations, which includes Dual-Involved Youth and Unaccompanied Refugee Minors
- Designed, implemented and analyzed youth feedback surveys
- Gathered and organized community resources

“…we have incorporated more youth feedback into GS [Grad Success] as a whole and hopefully have demonstrated the value of continuing to incorporate more and more youth voice moving forward.”

*Treehouse staff member

“The proximity facilitated by the program between decision-makers within Treehouse and fellows possibly influenced how decision-makers thought, felt and behaved.”

*Treehouse staff member
**Treehouse Fellowship**

Reflections on the 2023 Program Year

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**Areas for Improvement**

In their feedback, fellows and full-time staff shared areas for improvement, including:

- More consistent schedules
- More efficiently designed meetings
- Clearer roles
- Better-defined project structures to facilitate more meaningful and effective collaboration

“We [Treehouse staff] need better onramps for projects and more collaborative spaces created by leadership for thought partnering to occur.”

-Treehouse staff member

Fellows also articulated challenges in achieving genuine partnerships, identifying implicit organizational processes and power dynamics as potential barriers that could lead to tokenization. Consequently, they suggested:

- Early and transparent engagement during project design stages wherever possible
- Strategies to share power in order to ensure meaningful impact and authentic partnership with organizational staff
- More spaces for professional networking with peers, staff, volunteers, community partners and elders in the lived expert community.

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**Moving Forward**

The Treehouse Fellowship pilot facilitated a supportive community of practice, marked by a sense of belonging. It allowed fellows and full-time staff to develop skills, expand professional networks and make a deep impact in organizational culture and practices. The pilot has highlighted opportunities for organizational growth in order to effectively partner with youth and lived experts. For the second year of the Fellowship, we are building upon the brilliance of the founding fellows and responding to this feedback with regular work hours, rotating meeting leadership, policy-focused projects and more formalized networking and skill-development opportunities. As we look to the future, it is crucial that we build more employment opportunities for system-impacted young people, improve practices for power-sharing and true partnership and create spaces of belonging that center lived experience.

For more information, visit our [website](#) or e-mail us at [yap@treehouseforkids.org](mailto:yap@treehouseforkids.org).