Residential Programs
(for Providers)

YOUTH MOVE MASSACHUSETTS

The Power of Language

The words staff use every day shape how youth feel about themselves, their care, and their future. Language can either build trust and dignity or reinforce stigma and shame. When staff use clinical terms, youth often feel like they are being treated as problems rather than people. By choosing respectful, supportive language, staff can help create an environment where youth feel valued, safe, and connected.

For example, words like “client” or “patient” can feel cold and impersonal. Instead, saying “youth” reminds us that we are speaking about human beings, not case files or incidents. Similarly, when staff replace judgmental phrases like “you’re doing badly” with supportive ones like “you are having a hard time,” it helps youth feel understood rather than blamed. Even small changes, like being allowed to call peers “friends,” make a big difference.

Negative Word	Positive Change
Client	Youth/Young Adult
Code Blue	Medical Support
Code Red	Emergency
Code 5/AWOL	Emergency/ Runner
Community Service	Repair/Fix a relationship
Check in/Search	Check our items
Restitution	Repair/Fix it

Guidance for Staff

- Be honest about both the pros and cons of treatment.
- Provide a tour of the campus/buildings, along with a guidebook.
- Remember, youth may feel scared, lonely, or judged when arriving.
- Provide luggage or a backpack—never trash bags—for belongings.
- Encourage frequent family visits and connections with important people.
- Reassure youth who have been in hospitals that this program is a safe and supportive PLACE (Protect, Live, Accept, Care, Educate).
- Involve youth in privileges, programming, and community outings.
- Include youth in decision-making about their care.
- Help youth build connections with staff and administrators.
- Support friendships and family/sibling relationships.
- Ensure a consistent therapist is available.
- Include youth in medication and treatment decisions.
- Involve youth in interviewing new staff.
- Request youth feedback often.

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Key Reminders from Youth

- Youth should have the option to see doctors and specialists outside of the program. This supports normalcy, independence, and continuity of care.
- Families should be welcomed into the residence, including youth bedrooms and shared meals. This helps preserve family bonds while in care.
- Allow youth to call the people they live with friends. Building friendships is a vital part of feeling normal and supported.
- Some youth may want hugs or other safe, supportive gestures from staff. This can be very helpful for some. Never assume, though; always ask.
- Sibling visits should take place in comfortable, youth-friendly spaces (not offices). Sibling bonds provide stability and comfort.
- Many families struggle to visit. Programs should help with transportation or provide alternatives such as video calls (i.e. Zoom).
- For youth without active family involvement, staff should ensure access to caring adult role models who can provide guidance and support.
- Phone calls should not be strictly timed or limited. Open communication helps youth feel trusted and supported.
- When youth are struggling, they need compassion, coping strategies, and positive support, not seclusion or restraint.
- Use positive, affirming language that makes youth feel respected and understood. Words can either heal or harm.
- Knock before entering rooms. Provide real luggage or backpacks for belongings, not trash bags. This shows respect and dignity.
- Recognize birthdays, holidays, school achievements, and other milestones. These moments remind youth that they are valued as individuals.
- Let youth have a say in their routines, such as choosing meals, decorating their rooms, or selecting activities. Small choices build confidence and autonomy.
- Youth thrive when staff are consistent in their roles, expectations, and support. Frequent staff turnover or inconsistent rules can feel destabilizing.

Youth in residential care deserve environments that support their dignity, well-being, and potential. Every interaction matters. The way staff respond, the choices they offer, and the relationships they build all shape how youth experience residential programs. Youth notice when staff see them as whole people, not just as residents of a program. Residential programs should not feel like institutions; they should feel like communities where youth are safe, cared for, and empowered. When staff bring respect, empathy, and openness into their work, they transform residential care into a place of healing and hope. **The ultimate goal is clear: help youth feel safe, valued, and capable of building meaningful lives both during and after care.**

PPAL
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