

Youth Era Introduces PeerSidekick, an AI Tool That Backs Up Youth Peer Support Workers and Knows When to Pass to a Human

Built on 15 years of peer support training, PeerSidekick launches to Youth Era's Oregon workforce in November, with national availability planned for early 2027

EUGENE, OR, UNITED STATES, October 21, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- [Youth Era](#), a non-profit organization that empowers young people through peer support, drop-in centers, training and advocacy, announced PeerSidekick today, an AI tool for the trained peer support specialists who work with young people. When a peer support specialist hits a hard moment on the job, PeerSidekick helps them find what their training says, shows where that guidance comes from and tells them plainly when a question belongs with a supervisor. The tool launches to Youth Era's Oregon workforce in November.



The announcement comes as young people continue to face significant mental health challenges. According to the [CDC's 2025 Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), one in three U.S. high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the previous year, despite improvements since 2023. Youth peer support specialists help young people build connections, navigate challenges and access resources. PeerSidekick is designed to make the training behind that human support easier to use in everyday situations.

Youth Era trains peers thoroughly, but the ongoing guidance a youth peer support specialist needs often sits in a manual, a policy document or a slide deck from months ago. In the moment, nobody has time to dig for it.

"We trained thousands of peer support specialists and then sent them into the field with a binder," said Martin Rafferty, founder and CEO of Youth Era. "PeerSidekick puts everything they learned in their pocket, with the source right there, and it knows when to say 'take this to your supervisor.' Knowing its limits is what makes it safe to use."

Peer Support Specialists ask PeerSidekick questions the way they would ask a supervisor, such as how to prepare for a hard conversation or whether something crosses a boundary. Answers come only from Youth Era's training and vetted resources, never the open internet, and every answer shows its sources. When the tool doesn't know something, it says so, and it reminds users to leave out identifying details. It runs in any web browser, with nothing to download.

"Some of the questions our peers face are subtle, like whether sharing their own story would help a young person or where to draw a boundary," said Tia Barnes, COO of Youth Era. "PeerSidekick will make it easier to find the relevant guidance when those questions arise and recognize what needs a supervisor's input. That is especially valuable for peers working in rural communities, where support may be farther away."

PeerSidekick never talks to those seeking help, and it does not provide therapy, clinical advice, supervision or crisis intervention. When a question involves suicide risk, self-harm, abuse, overdose or another acute safety concern, the tool stops. It directs the specialist to their agency's escalation procedures, a supervisor and emergency resources.

"AI has no business talking to a kid in crisis. It does have a job helping the person who is," Rafferty said. "That is where we drew the line and we are not moving it."

Youth Era plans to offer PeerSidekick to partner peer support programs nationally in early 2027. Access will be through organizations only, for trained peer support specialists and approved staff. It is free for Youth Era staff and pricing for outside organizations will be announced with the national rollout.

PeerSidekick builds on Youth Era's [Uplift training](#), which a randomized controlled trial conducted in partnership with the University of Oxford found improved participants' peer support skills and well-being. Youth Era plans to evaluate PeerSidekick separately to understand how it supports peer specialists in their daily work.

"Peer support works because of the human at the center of it," Rafferty said. "The technology should protect that, not chip away at it."

About Youth Era

Youth Era is an Oregon-based organization that works to empower young people and strengthen the systems that serve them. Through peer support, drop-in centers, training and advocacy, Youth Era helps young people build connections, access resources and shape their own paths forward. The organization also works with partners to bring youth-centered approaches to more

communities. To learn more about Youth Era and its programs, visit youthera.org.

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