

Why Unionize? Compensation Transparency is needed at Friends of Youth.

### Meet Our Colleagues: Sabrina, Megan and Mel



(L-R: Megan, Sabrina, Mel)

Every Monday through Friday at 9am sharp, **Sabrina Brown** and **Megan Hills** open Drop-In services at Redmond Youth Services Center, also known as the Landing.

Sabrina has been a full-time member of RYSC's Drop-In Team since spring of 2022. Megan Hills, Sabrina's shift partner, joined our team in the summer of 2022. Both Megan and Sabrina are known for their warmth and positivity, and the exceptional support they provide to our guests. As our most senior Drop-In employees, they "hold it down," providing stability to the program and an experienced example for our new team members.

At the time of hire, Sabrina and Megan were paid \$20.00/hour as Youth Specialists. In January 2023, they received a \$.60 increase to \$20.60. In fall 2023, Sabrina and Megan reached out to their supervisor to inquire about getting a raise based on their Bachelor's and Master's degrees (respectively) in a relevant field, and seeking more information on the implementation of the pay scales announced earlier in the year. It was at this time they learned that, since April 2023, new Youth Specialists were being hired on with a starting pay of \$21.00. When this came to light, Megan and Sabrina's supervisor expressed to them his surprise that they were not being paid on par with the rest of the team, which had previously been unknown to him. For each of them, he advocated for a pay increase to the standard set by newly-hired Youth Specialists and an additional raise for their higher education.

As a result of their supervisor's advocacy, Megan's pay was finally increased to \$22.31 in November 2023. Despite her tenure of almost 2 years and a degree relevant to the field, Sabrina's pay only increased to the standard drop-in starting rate of \$21. **Within a week of the raises, discussion amongst Sabrina, Megan and their fellow Drop-In employees revealed that even after the recent increases, they were still being underpaid in comparison to new hires.** At that time, they discovered that part-time Drop-In staff hired that Fall had been offered a starting rate above \$23, and successfully negotiated pay upwards of \$24.

**"So even with my pay bump for my degree that they didn't seem to want to give me, new hires are still making more than me. Not their fault — I'm happy for them! But HR is just extremely non-transparent and unfair in doling out wages,"** Megan reflects. Friends of Youth's failure to ensure transparency and fairness in the agency's compensation practices sends a clear message to employees. Sabrina states, **"I feel completely undervalued and unseen despite all my time and effort put into this agency. The whole thing just angers me and it's a complete slap in the face."**

In the RYSC case management office, Housing Navigator **Mel Baron** works to connect unhoused young adults to housing opportunities. Mel has been with FOY since October 2021, starting out as a member of the RYSC Drop-In team and transitioning to Housing Navigation in 2022.

During Mel's time as a Drop-in staff, she was the only Spanish-speaking member of our team and took on a great deal of responsibility for communicating with our Spanish-speaking clients. At one point, Mel became heavily involved in efforts to support a high-needs Spanish-speaking client that frequented the space, causing the program management to take note. "My Program Manager and Director noticed the mental capacity I was bringing forth and being a mediator for the client throughout my shift. My manager acknowledged my dual language skills and brought up the importance of me being paid for my skills. The Director also agreed, both trying to communicate with HR and how I can get compensated for my dual language skill. **Weeks go by, and HR was not able to provide the PM or Director a response on why I couldn't get compensated for my skill.**"

In the summer of 2022, RYSC management continued to advocate for a raise for Mel. "Both Program Managers and the Director had a meeting with the COO [Patricia Charles-Heathers] and [then-CPO Damien]. **Each Manager and Director brought up my name and what I've been contributing to the shelter, being the only Spanish speaker and providing endless support to the Spanish speaking client. Both higher-ups appreciated my efforts, but brushed off the pay raises that management inquired for.**"

After becoming a Housing Navigator, Mel carried a caseload of 35 clients, larger than most of her counterparts' in YA services. Based on her bilingual ability, large caseload size, and MSW, Mel advocated to HR for a pay raise alongside another Masters-educated colleague. **"All we were told was to send in our resume and what degrees we have so they can look more into it."** Shortly after this conversation, the new \$26.00/hour base pay for case management job category was announced. Mel was told that further discussion about a wage increase for her bilingual ability and higher education would be a future conversation. Yet, the job posting for a second Housing Navigator advertised a pay differential for bilingual

ability that was being offered to new hires while being denied to Mel in her current role. **“Again, we all noticed a pattern that people who were hired outside the organization were able to negotiate pay and we were told to wait and that we were already given a pay increase.”**

Self-evidently, Spanish language ability is an incredibly valuable resource when providing services to Spanish-speaking youth. Our agency knows this. FOY advertises our number of Spanish-speaking staff in reports to funders and pays \$4.00/minute for the use of phone translation services, but the inconsistent application of a bilingual pay differential means that the bilingual staff who work in our programs may or may not actually be compensated for their dual language ability.

As FOY’s former CEO Terry Pottmeyer stated in an agency-wide email in June 2018, “A budget is a moral document” that ought to reflect the agency’s values and strategic plan. What do FOY’s current compensation practices reflect about the agency’s present values and operating strategy? Sabrina, Megan and Mel’s experiences illustrate that Friends of Youth management’s current compensation practices not only lack transparency and fairness but are designed with the short-sighted goal of getting open positions filled with no regard for appropriately valuing and retaining current employees long-term.

**With a union, compensation practices will be negotiated between us (our union) and our employer, outlined clearly in a legally-binding contract and consistently applied.**

*(Mel’s last day with Friends of Youth was January 2, 2024. She shortly begins her new position in which she will be compensated for both her MSW qualification and Spanish language skill. We wish her all the best!)*

### **Meet Dorothy, Program Coordinator at YouthCare’s GED Program**



"My coworkers and I at YouthCare were able to negotiate an initial wage increase for our first Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) as well as a yearly wage opener that allows us to go back to the table and renegotiate "across the board" increases for everyone. **In 2023 we were able to renegotiate and won a \$2.50/hour raise that goes into effect this month!** This raise does a lot for us, including increasing financial stability. As folks who work supporting youth experiencing homelessness, we are often on the brink of needing the same services ourselves, but this increase will make it easier for us to continue doing this work. This year, we will negotiate increases for 2025 and hope to get even more.

**We also all get a 2% step increase each year on our anniversary date.** This also helps make it easier for us to stay in our jobs without feeling pressure to look for a higher paying gig or having to work multiple jobs on top of this one. And if we get promoted into a higher paying position we stay at the same step so the years we work in other positions stay with us and count towards the wage we earn in the new position. We also have a section of our CBA that talks about how new hires to get credit for their previous experience, but if YouthCare started hiring new folks higher than that, it would initiate an increase in the entire pay range for that position and everyone in it would get increases paid retroactive to the date the employee was hired at the higher rate.

Negotiating wage increases has not been easy. As a non-profit, most of YouthCare's money comes from public and private grants that are often already portioned out for specific things. However, what I've learned as a member of the bargaining unit through this process the last few years is that it is possible for non-profits to pay their workers more and to give regular and equal raises. The CBA and the whole process of unionizing has forced our leadership to prioritize frontline staff. Because if frontline staff don't feel secure, if we have to work multiple jobs that causes us to burn out, if we can't do our jobs supporting young people because of this, then the whole organization doesn't work. **Frontline staff are the ones who do the actual work of furthering the mission of the organization and deserve to be paid that way."**

Thank you, Dorothy. We agree! That’s one of the reasons we’re joining together to form our union too!

**Our Union needs everyone’s input!** Have you also had issues with your wages that you would like to share either widely or just with those who need to know to make sure it’s included for development of our Union Contract proposals? **Share your story [here](#).** Have other issues that matter to you? Please feel free to use the link to share those too, or contact a signer of our open letter or our union organizer Corinne to tell us what you hope a union can do for you.

**Ready to unionize Friends of Youth? [Sign a card here.](#)**

Questions? Want more information? Contact a signer of the [December 18 Open Letter](#), email our Organizer Corinne Cosentino at [corinne@opeiu8.org](mailto:corinne@opeiu8.org) or call/text 425-318-2650. You can also see this [FAQ](#).