



The Montana Youth Leadership Forum (MYLiFe) is a leadership training program for high school students with disabilities. It is an all-expense paid training for youth entering their freshman year through their senior year of high school and is open to youth with any type of disability. MYLiFe brings together young people with disabilities who demonstrate leadership qualities. While at the forum, student delegates will work with staff to develop individualized leadership plans to further their particular academic and career goals. Delegates will learn workplace readiness skills, self-advocacy and communication skills, and more about resources and programs that are available to help them live more independently after high school. After leaving the forum, delegates will receive one year of one-on-one mentoring from MYLiFe staff to help continue skill development and work on the implementation of their Transition Empowerment Plans.

MYLiFe STEP II is the next step in providing leadership training to alumni as they transition from high school into the workforce. This 5-day long program is offered once a year at the Comfort Inn in Helena in June, and brings back alumni from the previous year's MYLiFe Summer Forum and MYLiFe Mini's.

Job Exploration

During the week, students participate in two job shadows. These shadows are based around the individual student's interest and future career goals. One shadow generally takes place in a community workplace and the other within a state government agency. Job Shadows enable students to spend time visiting a business or agency and exploring what a career in that field looks like. This is an opportunity to evaluate personal goals, target career skills for improvement, and explore possible career paths. Some shadows from past years' community workplaces include the Mountie Moose Bakery for the student who wants to be a pastry chef, Elkhorn farrier service for a delegate interested in blacksmithing, Discovery KidZone Preschool for a youth who wants to work with children, Yearry Photography for the aspiring photographer, Sanford Family Farms for the delegate who hopes to be a rancher, and Exploration Works Science center for the student who wants a job in the sciences. State agency job shadows included the Law Enforcement Academy for students interested in police work, the Department of Transportation for a delegate who wants to be a diesel mechanic, shadowing a U.S. Forest Ranger for a youth whose goal is to be a ranger, the Office of Public Instruction for delegates who want to be teachers, Montana Department of Commerce Film institute for the youth who is interested in filmmaking, and the Commissioner of Political Practices for the student who aspires to public service and politics.

Each job shadow is individually tailored to that youth's career goals and aspirations. MYLiFe arranges all needed accommodations for the youth to participate. Staff work with businesses and a committee of state employees and state agencies to provide a work experience that will give delegates a real world taste of that job or career.

Montana Career Pathways Workshop: The Montana Career Pathways workshop helps students learn about career options that are in demand in Montana, and the types of activities they can engage in to prepare for their next step after high school graduation. Delegates participate in a presentation on the program. A file will be built for each student within the Montana Career Pathways system for use throughout their work life. This system helps youth search and find the right job for them and then to learn what education and training is needed for that job.

Independent Living

Outside of employment exploration, Step 2 also provides necessary instruction and workshops related to social skills and living more independently.

Soft Skills: MYLiFe offers soft skills training. Youth learn valuable employment soft skills to help them develop and maintain positive relationships at work as well as learn important decision making skills to help them navigate the complex world of work. This portion of the week includes education and skill building in communication, attitude, work ethic, teamwork, and critical thinking. It also specifically trains youth for job interviews and workplace communication and conflict resolution.

Self-Advocacy: Step 2 also includes activities to further develop student's self-advocacy and leadership skills. We specifically discuss reasonable accommodations. Youth develop a working knowledge of what their rights are and what resources are available for securing accommodations. Students learn how to assess their own needs in the workplace, and are taught how to request accommodations in order to be successful in their employment.

Financial literacy: An extensive financial integrity training is a crucial part of Step 2. This covers areas like budgets, financial planning, debt management, housing, insurance, and taxes. The training also discusses issues specific to youth with disabilities such as SSI, Medicaid, and work incentives. Students with disabilities need to have financial literacy as part of their transition to adult life. Research shows that students who have financial education and learn financial responsibility drastically increase their chances of independent living and have better outcomes in employment. The training also includes information about resources and organizations that can help students with financial planning or further training.

Community Service

The final piece of Step 2 is a Community Service project. Students are given a couple options of places to volunteer. Once decided, delegates break into groups and develop a community action plan to address needs in the community. They implement that plan and volunteer on Friday of Step 2 week. MYLiFe Step 2 includes a community service project because we firmly believe that it is not enough to just be part of a community; we have an obligation to also give back to that community and strive to make that community better. In the past, youth have volunteered with Habitat for Humanity, Montana WILD, the Helena Food bank, Summer lunch programs and the Lewis & Clark county animal shelter. Our students have energy and passion and teaching them to volunteer in the community is such an important factor to living independently and being a happy, healthy, contributing members of society.