

## **Realistic Job Preview**

### ***Youth Counselor (YC)***

**Penny Sampson, Director:** Welcome, and thank you for your interest in the position of Youth Counselor at the Sununu Youth Services Center. I am Penny Sampson, I am the director of the facility and I'd like to take a few minutes to talk to you about the history of the facility and what you would do here in the position of Youth Counselor. The Sununu Center was initially established for juvenile offenders in 1858. It's the oldest continuously running institution of its type in the United States. SYSC is the only secure treatment facility for adjudicated youth in the state of New Hampshire. Our population includes youth with not only severe behavioral issues, but serious mental health needs as well. Youth Counselors are an integral part of all that we do here. It is a sometimes difficult balance to provide care and treatment and also have the ability to set limits and boundaries and keep the environment safe. This is very challenging work and it really isn't for everyone. But if you have a passion for working with youth and you want to do something that will really make a difference in the lives of teenagers, to give them guidance and direction and a better start, this may be the position for you. Thank you for considering becoming part of our team.

**Nanci Hamilton, Parent:** For him, the idea, the thoughts in our heads, were that it was pretty much just like prison. This looks like it's going to introduce him into a more serious world where there's really not much opportunity to turn back. But I was wrong.

#### ***John H. Sununu Youth Services Center***

##### ***Youth Counselor***

**Lynette, YC:** Usually by the time a student gets to the Sununu Center they have been through a variety of programs because this is the most restrictive placement in the state of New Hampshire for juveniles.

**Amy, YC:** It's locked, so it is secure, which a jail would be secure, but its – its treatment. These are kids, not adults. And our business is not to confine, it's to try to make a change.

**Joshua, YC:** And before they come on their floor they would go through a pat down search in the multipurpose room.

**Kevin Sullivan, Clinical & Residential Services:** Some kids might say, "I'm being punished. I'm stuck here away from my family and friends and my electronics." Um, I look at it as a treatment program. Um, when you look at an offense and you say this kid's bad and they've done something horrible, that's a moment in their life. Um, I look at their environment, um, what's normal to them might not be normal to me.

**Leticia, Unit Manager:** “Nobody loves me” uh “Nobody wants me” – we hear it more than we should hear it. And at times it can be very, very sad. And you will cry, you know hearing what they’ve gone through.

**Jay, YC:** I have one individual who is fourteen, was committed at thirteen. Um, he does not have much of a family life. His main guardian, he’s not, his parents aren’t in his life and his guardian just went to federal prison for three years for selling drugs.

**Lynette, YC:** Her mother was a prostitute and she, um, was taken out of the home and ran away and ran away and went through all her placements and they didn’t know what else to do with her so they put her at the youth development center. And her mother would visit her on occasion and she went a period of time that she couldn’t get a hold of her mother. And no one knew why she couldn’t get a hold of her mother and after about six weeks her mother’s body was found stuffed in the cupboard where they live.

**Amy, YC:** The majority of our kids don’t have, um, the best of backgrounds. A lot of them have been abused, have been neglected. Um, and as a result have become who they are. And we have this very small window of time in which we can try to help change their patterns of thinking and how they behave and how they manage themselves so that when they do become adults they can be a more productive member of society.

**Gail Snow, Clinical & Residential Services:** Our staff receive training before they’re able to come in and work on the floor with the youths so that they learn about defensive tactics, they learn how to, um, keep children safe when they’re acting out so that, you know the goal of course is that no one gets hurt. And one of the things we do after they go through our academy is they come in, come on a unit and they shadow another staff. And they do that for several weeks until the supervisor on that unit makes a determination that they’re ready to function more independently.

**Leticia, Unit Manager:** You come in and you go to roll call, and that’s extremely important. Uh, you get information about what’s happened over the last few days. If anyone’s having problems, if there’s any appointments coming up, who you’re gonna be working with, who’s gonna be on the response team.

**Lynette, YC:** Sometimes you come here and it’s a really bad day and kids are having a tough time and there’s a fight or there’s swearing and screaming and you can cut the tension with a knife. And that’s not easy to work in.

**Leticia, Unit Manager:** Residents can be very manipulative, especially if you’re new. They will test the boundaries and push and push and see what they can get away with.

**Jay, YC:** So they will lash out. A lot of it’s flailing around and stuff, or they’re just so frustrated and upset that they’re gonna kick whatever body part they see that’s available to them.

**Joshua, Former Student:** Kids are gonna say things. They're gonna say a lot of things. So, I mean you have to have a thick skin, you have to be able to be grounded and you have to be able to relate on a level of them.

**Lynette, YC:** And one of the things that is important to be successful in this job is to understand the individual. That each student comes here with a history and, and some of the histories are pretty horrific. On the other hand, you can't let that history be a crutch and an excuse for inappropriate behavior. You need to understand that history, work with that student about that history but don't let it be a rea-, uh, an excuse for misbehaving.

**Gail Snow, Clinical & Residential Services:** There are people that are very good at diffusing situations and that's what our training is based on: How to deescalate a situation so that it never rises to the point where people are in danger. And when it does rise to that level our staff are trained to be able to manage that so that nobody gets hurt.

**Jay, YC:** In here you hope you hope you can get these youth before they get into the adult system you hope you can help them make changes to their life so that they don't end up in the adult system.

**Joshua, YC:** All the rooms are set up the same. Uh, you got a bed, desk, and chair. Each room has a window where they can see out. Uh, they're allowed to keep certain items in their rooms, some personal stuff like pictures from home.

**Lynette, YC:** Once they're in here, um, they, there's a lot of treatment that goes on, there's groups that go on, um there's individual counseling that goes on.

**Kevin Sullivan, Clinical & Residential Services:** We lead in the country in the things we do here with regards to performance-based standards. Our clinicians, some of them teach at different universities and they practice it here.

**Lynette, YC:** They're small classrooms, so the students get a lot of, um, individual attention in their education. But I use the term student rather than resident because I think that we're always teaching them. Um, my philosophy in life is that discipline is teaching, that discipline is not meant for punishment. It's to teach someone that there are consequences for particular behaviors.

**Gail Snow, Clinical & Residential Services:** This job is not for everybody. You have to feel comfortable in an environment where there are crisis and there are unhappy children, and um, long hours sometimes, and – it can be difficult.

**Lynette, YC:** I would say if you have a jail mentality, this is not the place to be. Um, we are not prison guards. We are here to help kids. Um, that being said, remember that accountability is an important part of treatment. That the most appropriate and best Youth Counselors are those that are fair and consistent.

**Amy, YC:** No matter how different we all are as people, we all have to be on the same page when it comes to dealing with the kids: consistent rules, expectations of behavior, what we want them to do, what we don't want them to do. It cannot change and vary from shift – from staff to staff and shift to shift because if it does, these kids have all the time in the world to watch this. They know exactly where the weak spots are and they will find them.

**Lynette, YC:** I am a firm believer that the hardest work and the most important work takes place on the unit, because that's where the kids live every day. Um, as a counselor we are role models, we are mentors, um, we are quasi parents, um, because we are teaching kids.

**Joshua, YC:** So we could be sitting here playing a card game, having a conversation. The group might be watching a movie over here and we might be sitting together on the couches. Um, every day is different and it always changes.

**Joshua, Former Student:** They believed in me. That was really the biggest thing. They – it wasn't, you know, supporting me in whatever ideas I thought I had, it was correcting me on what things are. It wasn't you know, I didn't say, "Oh I'm gonna .... My car" and they weren't like, "Oh that's good, that's great." They were like, "Okay how are you gonna do that?"

**Jay, YC:** You need to be able to communicate verbally as well as written, and just be able to speak to someone. Sometimes that's all somebody needs. Just someone to talk to, listen, you know to listen to them, listen to them vent, talk to them a little bit.

**Shawn, YC:** I'm competitive with the kids. So you know I give them like a little challenge, and they love that. Usually if I beat them like, you know, "Hey, you know, you played well and your heart was there but the better man won," and they'll be like, "Oh, that's it. Next game, Shawn. Next game." And I'm like, "All right, well, we'll see what you have." And while I'm playing cribbage with the kids, that's when I'm like, "So...what happened, John? Why are you over here? What's going on man?"

**Nanci Hamilton, Parent:** Um, without that youth counselor his outcome, his life at this point would be radically different.

**Joshua, Former Student:** A lot of kids in placements, when they want to get out and they have a plan its...way up there somewhere. And you really need somebody that, you know, you really need the grounding of being like, "No, life is going to be terrible when you leave."

**Kevin Sullivan, Clinical & Residential Services:** These residents are our future. And we're investing in our future. And most of the folks who work here, if not...I don't want to speak for everyone, believe that. They truly believe that.

**Amy, YC:** We all have a basic common want, and that's for the kids to get better, for us to be able to make a difference in their lives. If you can help one kid, that's the reason we all come here. That's the reason we all stay.

***John H. Sununu Youth Services Center  
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