

POINT SOURCE YOUTH ON BEHALF OF OCFS PRESENTS:

YOUTH VOICE AND AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

Executive Summary

Co-creating and designing with young adults is an essential part of providing adequate services to youth. This toolkit explores authentic youth engagement, and best practices for engaging youth as meaningful partners in runaway and homeless youth programs — including how it benefits young people, why it works, and what it looks like in practice. Learn how to define and combat adultism and tokenism. Walk away from reading this toolkit with concrete tools to work with youth in empowering ways such as implementing YABs (Youth Advisory Boards) as well as hiring young people to create lasting organizational and community change.

Speakers

Dajonee Hale, Youth Support Specialist, *Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness*

Hannah Bollack, Youth Engagement Coordinator, *THRIVE! Host Home Network SHIP of Frederick County*

Emily Fulton- Foley, Executive Director, *Northfield Union of Youth*



Office of Children
and Family Services

The purpose of this resource is to provide information & guidance from experts in their field that is as updated and accurate as possible. It is not intended to give medical advice for individuals or organizations.

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Definitions

ADULTISM

Discriminating against and/or oppressing young people because of their age. This includes the behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that older adults are more superior and more entitled than young people.

TOKENISM

Involving or engaging youth to give the appearance that there is equity and equality when in fact the youth are not given the space to make a real impact. Oftentimes, this may look like a young person being invited to a meeting without background information and not being invited to express themselves.

YAB / YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

A collective of young people that is usually formed to give advice, support, and help drive decisions of the organizations. They both support the organization and need support from the organization.



Three Ways to Engage Youth as Meaningful Partners in Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs

1

Create youth-led activities and/or external events led and developed by youth.

Youth often have creative ideas for activities or external events, but aren't uplifted and affirmed with resources to implement them. Give young people the support they need to create activity spaces outside of office hours. For example, providers might support youth in hosting a weekly or monthly activity such as LGBTQ+ pizza night, game night, movie night with snacks and popcorn, etc. Aim for similarly cost-efficient ideas that your local YAB can host. These events allow for folks to gather in new meaningful ways outside of strictly transactional meetings.

2

Ensure transparency and accessibility for youth across all programs.

Transparency is foundational to equitable practices. It's important to invite youth insight into programs, while also creating healthy boundaries. Transparency should include access to budgets when working with funding and grant programs, as well as any information about high-quality opportunities that may benefit a young person's life, including employment and education.

3

Create new spaces for meaningful collaboration.

Work together with young people to explore innovative ways to secure funding for newly created positions for youth, and/or for funding streams to increase youth compensation. Develop new programming such as a youth-led internship program that benefits both youth and organizations. As you work to create more opportunities for youth to have meaningful leadership at your organization, ensure that you're collaborating with young people along the way — these new spaces for youth are to help young people discover (or rediscover) their passions and dreams, so their input and guidance is key each step of the way.





Five Best Practices When Partnering with Youth

1 Center youth voice by providing brave platforms and creating accommodating spaces that are not generalized but rather, tailored to meet individual needs. Each young person has different levels of comfortability, so as you create brave spaces it's important to create processes and opportunities for young people to express their needs. This might look like giving youth the opportunity to request a 1-on-1 conversation, peer-to-peer dialogue spaces, or facilitated YAB meetings through digital channels or in-person.

2 Ensure processes and organizational language are accessible to all. Use reciprocal language (the practice of communicating our needs and desires and having others acknowledge and respond to our expressed needs) to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunications. Accessible language helps to foster a mutual understanding, which will help develop young people's confidence and guide them towards feeling more affirmed and empowered. Lack of communication, inaccessible language and inconsistent communication practices can often lead to disengagement.

3 Recognize and value what young people bring to the table. Young people accessing your program or receiving services often have a deep understanding of their community/ environment and have close connections in the community. Through those connections and expertise, young people have the opportunity to develop programs to be more effective and improve the health of the overall youth population, especially those seeking services. Local organizations and state agencies have ample opportunity to partner with youth partners on training opportunities and capacity-building that can help young people achieve their goals.



4

Invest in the long-term and create more opportunities for youth partnerships.

Most partnerships tied to youth services and youth-specific projects tend to dissolve when funding is no longer available. In order to truly value youth partnership and continue work beyond limited projects, invest in systems, equipment, and connections that will provide value in the long term. Mat-Su Youth Action Board provided laptops, cameras, and other equipment to members to support ongoing advocacy and efforts to improve the youth homelessness response system.

Ask other youth providers about their needs and how partners can support them. In order to change traditional systems, we must be inclusive of non-traditional perspectives. Young people are creative, innovative, and can be authentic when sharing knowledge and experiences—which is only possible when youth compensation is fair.

For example: The Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) is a great opportunity for youth voices to be empowered, build a local Youth Action Board, and fill gaps with YHDP programs; technical assistance (TA) is available for a year. Make sure you're thinking critically about what happens after all the programs have been implemented, TA is no longer available, and funding has dried up. Always be focused on the long-term and ways for opportunities to grow and evolve.

5

Listen, learn and share power.

Everyone is learning from one another in this work, and it's important to be open to adapting. Treat youth-led groups with the same respect as you treat other organizations or partners you work with. It's important to be upfront about power dynamics in this work and acknowledge that these dynamics never simply disappear, no matter how youth-inclusive we are. By acknowledging the various power dynamics at play, you can create more honest spaces that lend themselves to more accountability.





Key Steps to Implementing a Youth Advisory Board

STEP 1

Awareness is the first step towards building a YAB. Task youth in your program with thinking of ideas and the responsibilities of building a YAB. It is important to understand that establishing a YAB is a commitment and requires hard work and in-depth processes to become functional and sustainable.

STEP 2

Understand both organizational and youth needs, intentions, capabilities, and capacity to remain involved in this work and to be successful in this work. Make sure that you set folks up for success by establishing different levels (low, medium, and high) of commitment prior to onboarding members and explain in depth and detail what it is and what it looks like. Check in along the way to give folks opportunities to participate as best as they can.

STEP 3

Develop onboarding materials that are co-created with youth. These materials should include orientations and trainings that are tailored to YHDP/YAB/organizational work. Job descriptions, goals and objectives worksheets, and other tangible materials should be made accessible and transparent for reference.

STEP 4

Secure dedicated funding for YAB. This includes youth compensation, event / programming funding, equipment and technology, internet, SWAG, transportation, and more. If possible, write in a budget line as “emergency funds” that can be used in the case of a YAB member experiencing a crisis in which they may not be able to afford basic needs or the means to stay involved, but want to continue to participate in the YAB. We suggest folks begin looking into local and state funding prior to pursuing federal funds. Local and state funds have been discovered to be more flexible and have a less complicated application process for grant writing. This can also benefit organizations and youth participating in YAB as they have the potential to gain grant writing experience and raise funds for the organization.

TIP: Finding access to local funders or private foundations requires researching grant opportunities directly through their website. Funding options vary based on your state and community.



STEP 5

Schedule dedicated time to check in with each individual YAB member to help develop a meaningful role/job description in YAB. Allow space for creativity. Check-in at least once a month to gauge members' interest in participating in upcoming activities or working in the community. We often see that YAB members have awesome, innovative ideas that benefit young people in the community with the support of the organization.

STEP 6

Collaborate with other youth organizations and local funders in the community and make work enjoyable and fun. Help youth find meaningful roles and to take ownership of the work they are doing. Events require researching other local events, monitoring communications from potential partners in the community, your YAB budget, building relationships with adult partners including your city government offices, youth providers, and mainstream partners (school district, OCS, Dept of Labor, etc.) to maximize the impact of the event or youth activity.

For example: The Mat-Su Youth Action Board was interested in participating in a Halloween-themed event that would create awareness of the Mat-Su YAB and also serve as an outreach effort to raise awareness of YAB opportunities and youth services in the community. The Mat-Su YAB then partnered with the City of Wasilla to secure table space during this event — this created both a cost-effective and fun event where the YAB could enjoy themselves.

STEP 7

Education around current issues locally and statewide is critical. Everyone must learn about the current issues within the community in order for YAB members to properly advocate for changes in their youth homelessness response system. Regular updates from internal and external data sources should be implemented at least once a month. Often, the needs of youth experiencing homelessness change, and trends can be found via data. YAB organizations can identify trends to help prevent or reduce homelessness and better meet the current needs of youth.



“Time is so important.
It takes time to learn
all these things. By
learning all these things,
I actually learn my role.
And I can transform
these hardships ... [and]
actually use them to
empower me in my role.”

— Hanna Bollack



FAQs



What is authentic youth engagement and how can organizations infuse it into their structure, practice, and policies? What does this look like in action?

Dajonee Hale, Youth Support Specialist, *Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness*

Authentic youth engagement means involving youth in a not superficial way. Many agencies claim to have youth involvement and YABS, but don't involve youth beyond superficial interactions with little meaningful structure. These organizations are not meeting with youth consistently or **providing guidance and space for youth to be involved.**

Hanna Bollack, Youth Engagement Coordinator, *THRIVE! Host Home Network SHIP of Frederick County*

For an organization to be youth-centered, there must be **opportunities for youth that are empowering, but not exploitative** – I feel like there is a fine line between the two.” Youth sharing their story can have a positive impact within the community, which can be empowering. However, asking a young adult to share their story has the potential to be exploitative.

Emily Fulton-Foley, Executive Director, *Northfield Union of Youth*

There cannot be authenticity from an organizational standpoint unless everyone from that organization personally understands how young people lead their roles. Make sure everyone is allowing the youth to **guide positions of power and affirming them to make important decisions.** We need to balance not infantilizing young people and explaining things to death with not assuming that youth know what you know within your profession. There has to be room for teaching and educating each other.





What are the important components of effective youth-adult partnerships? How do you contrast that to tokenism?

Emily Fulton-Foley, Executive Director, *Northfield Union of Youth*

You have to actually listen to the youth and make sure you are truly listening to make a change. Avoid tokenizing spaces and making youth feel uncomfortable to be involved and advocate for themselves. Youth should have an opportunity to describe issues in their own words. When adults only see from their lenses, their view is naturally limited. The way we frame a problem is the way we view the solution. Provide youth opportunities and space to provide solutions and how they see the problem being solved. If there are barriers to implementing the solutions, have conversations and be willing to work together to overcome them...Two of the biggest components of youth-adult partnerships are **respect and support**. Having mutual respect within the relationship and allowing the youth to recognize that you see them as an equal.

Dajonee Hale, Youth Support Specialist, *Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness*

Working with the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program was a big reflection for me — I recognized that adults did not know how to work or collaborate with youth and youth were disengaging from the work entirely. One of the most frustrating things was the **language** that was being used by adult partners. They invite young people to the meetings and then start using all these federal terms and acronyms that we don't understand. When working with youth, know that not all youth understand these federal terms and language. When building a youth-adult partnership, find other adults that have **built a trusting relationship** to help with the process of empowering young people and establishing youth-adult partnerships.





How do we overcome the power struggle that can exist when youth are asked to participate in an adult-led organization or field? How does this relate to adultism?

Hanna Bollack, Youth Engagement Coordinator, *THRIVE! Host Home Network SHIP of Frederick County*

Folks can make an **organizational commitment** to dismantle adultist traits and values that may appear. Understand what you bring to the space and the organization and provide a space to orient the youth. Dedicate time to dismantling these biases that appear in many organizations. [It's also important to] help youth understand what their lived experience can contribute to the organization. I knew that I didn't have a college degree – it took time for me to understand that I bring my lived experience as my expertise.

Emily Fulton-Foley, Executive Director, *Northfield Union of Youth*

Adults need to understand that they still have so much **to learn**. Adult partners can learn from youth experiences. It is important to think about working with youth as a collaboration and not just a meeting. Adult partners need to take the time before meetings to help youth prepare properly. Support young people in finding their own voice during meetings. Afterward, debrief with the youth. Check-in to see how they experienced the meeting, what they learned, and what questions they may have. Be sure to show validation for how and when they showed up.





What are some suggestions you have when it comes to hiring youth to support other young people and communities seeking safe and stable housing?

Emily Fulton-Foley, Executive Director, *Northfield Union of Youth*

Pay young people appropriate wages. Don't just say they are young and don't deserve to be paid what older folks are paid. We compensate employees because we value their time and experience – we should do the same for the young people.

Don't discount someone because of their age. Know the rules and regulations for your area. We have 14-year-olds that work and volunteer with us on a schedule that accommodates other responsibilities. Recognize that work-life balance should exist for youth as well.

Set clear boundaries. If a young person is socializing with peers while on the clock, just gently pull them aside and explain the boundaries for when they are working versus when they are not. Also, consider what they are getting out of those social moments that might help them fulfill their job duties. Those conversations may help the young person better do their job.

Know how to **manage and support.** Help guide youth when responsibilities are not being met. You must be patient and take the time to help youth grow and develop.

Know when to **check your own ego** as an adult. Know that your ability to be good at your job is tied to how well the young person succeeds at theirs.



How can communities access funding to hire and support youth within their organizations?

Dajonee Hale, Youth Support Specialist, *Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness*

Prioritize local funding that is **community-based, reachable, and relatively easier to obtain** and manage. Research, state, local and independent funders. Having flexible funds tends to be best when working with youth because you get to tailor the funding and structure to best meet youth needs. Get on email lists so you are aware of upcoming funding opportunities.





How do you balance an authentic relationship with youth without them thinking they are your “buddy”?

Dajonee Hale, Youth Support Specialist, *Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness*

I set boundaries at work and identify my position, but make myself available to the members when needed. Many of the youth I work with communicate via social media or after hours, so I have an understanding of open transparent communication. I make sure they know my working hours. I make sure they know they can call me for emergencies after hours if needed. But we have to respect each other’s personal life. I don’t have to say “ I am not your buddy, but I am here for you”. It is an unspoken bond and understanding.

Emily Fulton-Foley, Executive Director, *Northfield Union of Youth*

We don’t hang out just for the sake of hanging out. We don’t step outside of the structure of work. Clients can know about me and when I am not feeling great and it is okay for them to acknowledge that. It’s okay to set boundaries and say, “I’m not going to discuss that.” Setting boundaries around personal information allows people to know what’s allowed on a personal level.

When you say, “You can call me in emergencies,” you may need to help quantify what an emergency means to you and to the organization. Discuss what are the appropriate conversations and what constitutes an emergency that warrants an after-work hours call. When youth are around talking about whatever, sometimes I just mention that I am a **mandated reporter** and that reminds them of certain boundaries. That one statement can make a difference in how a young person can see you as a professional.



**“Pay youth
appropriate
wages and
don’t just say,
hey they’re
young and
don’t deserve
to earn what
I earn.”**

— Emily Fulton-Foley



Four Actions You Can Take Now

1

Donate your time and show random acts of kindness. Spend quality time with youth, offer lunch or a coffee and have a regular conversation.

2

Help youth set goals, and reward efforts and not only outcomes.

3

Be transparent about problems in your community and show how youth involvement impacts these issues.

4

Integrate youth into committees and meetings with adults who can act as mentors.



Dos and Don'ts: Policies, Practices, And Engaging with Youth Partners



Do

- Pay young people at a **living rate**. (Venmo, Cashapp, PayPal, etc.)
- Create **safe spaces** that are collectively defined by participants in which they can be themselves, without restrictions or filters.
- Treat young people like they are **valuable** because they are. Remember that they matter.
- **Give more than 3 chances**. Most of the time, youth are familiar with loved ones in their life giving up on them; it could take 10, or even 20 times before a young person finds their healthy path toward becoming self-sustainable.
- Be patient, compassionate, and understanding when a young person shows up. **Reward effort**.
- **Solidify commitments**. Provide verbal and written reminders of youth goals and commitments.



Don't

- Treat young people like **liabilities**.
- Get discouraged when young people **may not have the capacity** to show up.
- Use visa **gift cards as a form of payment** to compensate youth consultants; instead, ask about preferred payments and discuss compensation prior to work – it's important.
- Ask **unnecessary questions** that have nothing to do with the need. Young people oftentimes have to navigate through various services and go through many assessments. Streamline potentially taxing processes for necessity.
- **Get upset** when young people do not do what you want them to do. Instead, continue to build trust by remaining reliable.





Organizational Checklist for Youth Voice and Authentic Engagement



Overview

When working with young people who are at-risk of/or experiencing homelessness, ensuring staff are adequately knowledgeable and prepared to work with clients is a key element to providing a safe platform for youth voice and authentic youth engagement. Authentic youth engagement means being open to sharing power to co-create with people you are serving. In order to see a change from traditional work environments, we must think untraditionally and provide young people with platforms to communicate their experiences, knowledge, and ideas.



Staff Training

Youth-serving organizations should always provide high-quality trainings to staff that will help equip them with the skills and knowledge to create and maintain an equitable, youth-inclusive environment. The organization should often monitor the different types of training provided to staff to best address the evolving trends and needs of youth. There is not a one size fits all training that will adequately prepare staff and the types of training will depend on both the needs of and the demographics the organization is serving. To ensure all training material is standardized for all employees, regardless of position or location, an organization can develop a quarterly consistent training program. Especially in this field of work, it is important to create a culture of learning by promoting the value of employee learning and development. If your organization is serving marginalized communities, such as: Black, Brown, Indigenous and/or LGBTQ+ young people, training for staff should be provided with knowledge covering historical and cultural contexts.

Historical/Cultural Context Trainings:

- Cultural Awareness Training
- Interactive Cultural Training
- Cultural Intelligence Training
- Anti-Racist Training
- Racial Equity Training
- LGBTQ+ Awareness/Diversity Training



Examples of quarterly mandatory training include:

- Health and safety (First aid)
- Diversity, equality, and inclusion

 **Written Policies**

For youth-serving organizations, providing well-written policies, procedures and guidelines to staff is imperative. Policies, procedures and guidelines should be easily accessible for youth accessing services and should be posted in public spaces. It is important that all written policies are followed by all staff members, including new hires when engaging with youth daily as part of their job description/duties.

History and Intentions (Mission & Vision)

- What is your mission and vision statement?
- What has your organization done in the past until this present day to dismantle the current inequitable systems?
- Were youth involved in the founding process of your organization?
- Are you susceptible to constructive criticism and feedback from clients in your program and what is the process for receiving feedback?
- How do you ensure that your staff is well taken care of in this work?

Anti-Racism and Anti-Discrimination

- Is your work environment inclusive of marginalized communities such as Black, Brown, Indigenous and LGBTQ+ young people?
- What policies are in place if a client reports that they have experienced discrimination when accessing services in your program?



Creating and Maintaining Equitable Spaces

- Are you co-creating / regularly updating policies with young people in your program?
- Are you ensuring youth consultants are equitably provided with opportunities?
- How are you ensuring young people are safe and comfortable in your work environment?

Continuous Quality Improvement

- Do you have multiple outlets for young people to share their experiences (positive or negative) that will help improve their experience and your programs?
- How do you measure success in your programs?

Additional Resources

- [Faith Base Funder](#)
- [Federal Grant Site](#)
- [Reference to a developed Youth Action Board](#)

