

Starting a Youth Advisory Council

Stage 1: Planning and Recruitment

What is a Youth Advisory Council?

Youth Advisory Committees invite youth to give meaningful input into the decision-making process of child-serving systems with regards to service design, implementation, policy and practice. These committees may serve as a resource to any agency, organization or provider who serve young people and are interested in receiving feedback from youth. These committees may serve as an advisory board to a specific agency or the community as a whole.

Youth Advisory Committees ensure that services and supports in the community are truly meeting the needs of young people. Through youth councils young people not only help to improve their community as well as build their personal advocacy and leadership abilities. Youth who are involved in youth councils often speak of the empowering feeling that comes from helping their peers. Together, committee member's better child and young adult serving systems and raise awareness, while generating support in the larger community.

First steps of starting a YAC:

One of the most important things to take into consideration when developing a Youth Advisory Council (YAC) is evaluating whether or not the organization/community is truly prepared to listen to young people and take action alongside them. Youth Advisory Councils create a dialog and partnership between youth and adults; both groups must be prepared to have open communication and collaboration.

Here are some steps we recommend when developing a YAC:

1) Evaluate your readiness

The very first step you should take is to truly think about why it is important to hear firsthand young people's thoughts, needs and desires with regards to the supports they receive in the community. Take the time to discuss this among your staff, administration and/or board of directors. This can be done through established meetings or as a wide initiative.

Some questions to ask are:

- What is it going to mean to your organization/community?
- What is the level of commitment? Is everyone on board?
- How comfortable is the organization with youth speaking up? Would adults feel comfortable serving on committees, workgroups, etc. with youth as equal partners at the table?
- What will the organization do with the input you receive? Will you take action?

Organizational readiness and youth involvement questionnaires are available to help you with this process. They will help you to identify your strengths as well as some possible barriers you may have to overcome. If you have not received one with this document and would like one, please contact the Youth Power office.

Hopefully everyone will be on the same page and it will be easy to proceed. Do not be discouraged if you discover some unforeseen barriers while going through this process. It is good to identify these issues early on and come up with a plan to address these challenges throughout the development stages.

2) Identify some young people to help with the planning

We find that often a group of adults will want to start a YAC to engage youth and hear from them directly. Often, planning takes place without including young people. We recommend beginning as you mean to go on. Think about the young people you interact with. Ask them if they would be interested in helping to design something that could really impact your agency and the greater community. If you are agency administration and you do not interact with youth directly then we strongly recommend contacting all staff to help you identify young people. If that does not work hold a community forum or focus group to ask young people about how to set up the YAC to be as “youth friendly,” appealing and effective as possible. You may find several youths at that meeting that would like to join the planning committee.

3) Start a planning committee

The first two steps are your preliminary planning phases. Once you complete those you will be ready to start your planning for the actual YAC. Planning topics include a purpose statement, membership recruitment and selection, and the first meeting schedule. Get together a group of people to do all of the logistical work. This group should be made up of youth and adults but be youth driven. Remember that you want to leave flexibility for the YAC to prioritize their own work and set meeting dates and times that work best for them.

Purpose:

Youth Advisory Councils typically meet to provide feedback on particular issues as requested by the organization or community. The group can also take on their own projects that help to achieve greater awareness and systems change.

It is important for your planning committee to define what it is you are forming the group to do so that when you begin recruitment the young people know what they are signing up for. You may choose to write a purpose statement or list out the specific things you would like the council to take on. It should be in language youth will be able to understand and relate to. Try to avoid systems buzz terms that might not be in a young person’s vocabulary. Mission and vision statements can be written by the YAC after formation.

How to Recruit: Application Process

Finding young people in the community that would like to participate in a YAC is not always easy. It takes grassroots promotion to make it happen. This means you have to make sure your information gets in the hands of youth and is written in such a way that it is appealing to them.

Flyer and Application:

Often a flyer is designed to grab attention and quickly summarize what the YAC will be all about. The first time you recruit you might want to promote it as something new. The youth coming on board will get to design something that can really make a difference in the community. Make sure the young people on your planning committee take the lead or design the flyer. They are the experts on what appeals to other young people. You can then attach an application form that the young person should fill out themselves or with assistance. It is very important that the young person go through the application process themselves and that it is not done for them. Again, having young people on your planning team will ensure that everything you are asking for is understandable and not so overwhelming that no one will fill it out.

You may want to leave the application general and follow up with interviews. This may mean asking a few questions about location and age. Then follow up with short answer and/or essay questions. We find that this is the best way to gauge the interest of the young person. Don't go by length of the response but rather the conviction by which it is delivered. We have received one sentence responses that say it all. There is nothing wrong with responses being short and to the point. If you choose, you can follow up with questions in the interview process.

Distribution & Promotion:

Sending out announcements over list-serves and mailing lists is important but it is best not to rely solely on them for distribution. Often these announcements do not leave the desk of the adult you sent it to. Whenever possible ask the youth on your planning committee to attend community youth groups and talk directly to youth about the YAC. We find that direct peer outreach is the best way to get more youth interested.

In the same way, if you are an adult on the planning committee and you want some of your colleagues and peers to spread the word to youth they work with give them a call and follow up on the announcement you sent them. It lets them know that this is something that is truly important and should not be put off. In the past, members of Youth Power have gotten commissioners of county agencies to write a cover letter which helps grab the attention of adult workers.

Electronic versions are also an important tool for spreading the word to youth. Formatting your flyer so that it can be posted on message boards, blogs, myspace, etc. is a good idea.

Composition of the YAC:

When selecting the youth who will serve on the YAC it is important to take into account diversity, age and vested interest. You want to have a team that fully represents the youth you serve.

Diversity of committee

A diverse membership population is needed to have an efficient and effective youth council. Members should come from all geographic areas of the community you serve and come from different economic backgrounds and experiences. It is also important to have a YAC that is culturally competent and is comprised of members that have diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

Age Range

It is essential that the youth committee be made up of youth. For committees that are strictly talking about children's services your age range should be close to 14- 20 years old. If the YAC's purpose is to provide input into the transition to adulthood you may want to go to age 25. At no time should the members of the committee be older than 25.

Vested Interest

If the YAC is being formed to give input on a specific topic or service, then it is important to make sure that the members you select have personal experience in this area. For example, if you are an organization that serves people with disabilities and are looking for input regarding the services you deliver, then your YAC should be comprised of youth who have diverse disabilities.

Paid vs. Unpaid:

Many organizations have decided to pay members of a YAC for their time and expertise. Each member is given a stipend for their time. This is not a requirement of a YAC. Within the youth movement there is some debate around this. We feel that it is important to pay us for work we do because we act as consultants. However, many of us do this work because we believe in it and we feel it is necessary. It is volunteer work that helps our community while building personal leadership skills. If you have the budget that allows for the youth to be paid, then you should pay them. If not, it should be a goal to increase your budget for youth involvement so that in the near future you are able to pay youth for their time and efforts.

Remember that the purpose of a Youth Advisory Council is to increase communication and collaboration between youth and adults. It's about sharing and ensuring that youth have a voice within their services and community. After all youth are the future and they should be encouraged to take an active role in the world they live in.

Nothing About us Without us!

"Stage 2: Establishing a YAC structure and sustaining it" is coming soon!

If you would like more information or technical assistance with starting a Youth Advisory Committee please contact Youth Power at 518-432-0333 or email ypinfo@ftnys.org