



Guide for Engaging Youth in Decision Making and Planning

Local Continuums of Care (CoC) are increasingly aware of the importance of direct youth participation in the development and implementation of the coordinated community response to prevent and end youth homelessness. When youth are engaged during the development of projects, projects are stronger and youth are more likely to accept and adopt them, thereby increasing impact. Meaningful youth engagement views youth as equal partners with adults in the decision making process.

Suggested Steps for Engaging Youth

- 1. Assess:** Assess how the CoC and its projects are currently engaging youth and what engagement should look like in the future. Not every project or activity will be able to involve youth at the highest levels of control. The ability to involve youth will be affected by a project's current staff or resource capacity, its purpose for involving youth, and internal organizational support for involving youth. Organizational capacity and support is a key component in sustaining youth involvement. The [Youth Infusion Self-Assessment](#) is a tool for organizations to use in assessing their motivations for involving youth, their organizational structure, and where to plug in youth most effectively.
- 2. Consult:** Once an assessment of the current state of youth engagement has been conducted, identify organizations that are successfully collaborating with youth to learn how they started. Ask for recommendations or lessons learned and make sure to ask for advice from participating youth

as well as adults who facilitate or administer the projects. Also reach out to projects that have tried but failed to successfully implement youth engagement strategies and to youth who are not currently part of CoC or project-level work, but who are interested in developing strategies to help the CoC and its projects be youth focused.

Remember, when involving youth, organizations should secure funding sources to compensate youth for their time and transportation costs. Youth often have jobs, homework, and family responsibilities that they are missing when they are participating in your engagement activities.

- 3. Determine:** Combine the assessment outcome with consultation research to determine how youth will be engaged in the CoC and individual projects. Make sure to



frame the long-term goal – the way that the CoC or the projects **should** engage youth – and not be limited by short-term barriers that stand in the way of the optimal level of engagement.

- 4. Implement:** Once the decision has been made about where to include youth, develop a youth recruitment plan and an adult engagement strategy. A recruitment plan outlines how youth will be identified for roles in CoC committees, youth boards, or project leadership structures and how to keep youth engaged in the long term. Issues to consider include: recruiting full representation of the local youth population (e.g. LGBTQ, people of color, pregnant or parenting youth, etc.), skills or capabilities needed by youth, and training that may need to be provided. The adult engagement strategy should involve showing leaders in the CoC and in its youth-serving projects the value of youth engagement and training them to work with youth in a way that is respectful, and affirming, allowing young people to add as much value as possible. To ensure success, staff need a full understanding of why the CoC or the project is choosing to engage youth more actively.
- 5. Evaluate:** Develop a plan to review and monitor youth involvement regularly. During the evaluation, engage both youth and adults to evaluate effectiveness. The [Youth Involvement and Engagement Assessment Tool](#) offers a mechanism for organizations and community partners to define how youth are involved, and whether strategies are working to sustain youth engagement.

Best Practices for Engaging Youth

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people’s strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. Positive youth development can and should be implemented in every aspect of the youth homelessness response system, including systems planning and assessment, development and implementation of PIT counts, project planning and implementation, case management service interactions, and anywhere that youth are either directly or otherwise impacted.

This year, the National Youth Forum on Homelessness, supported by the True Colors Fund and the National Alliance to End Homelessness, has had a tremendous impact on national policy and federal programs, providing critical feedback to USICH, HUD, and HHS on policy development, and rating applications for HUD’s Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program.

Youth Advisory Boards (YAB) are one way a CoC can incorporate Positive Youth Development into its operations. YABs use an independent committee structure in formal partnership with CoC stakeholders to elevate and integrate



youth into planning and implementation decision making that directly affects their generation and personal experience. They provide important development opportunities for the young people who participate, serve as a sounding board for stakeholder ideas, and generate invaluable new ideas that can only come with first hand perspective. YABs should be an ongoing community initiative, rather than just a response to a single application or project need.

Shared Decision Making describes the level of youth participation and leadership where youth and adults are equally valued and accountable for decision making on a project, in a committee, for an organization, or the CoC. Organizations may have different levels of youth control within their current operations, but all should be working towards the highest level of integration of youth involvement.

Levels of Decision-Making for Youth

| <i>Levels of Control</i> | Level of Decision-Making | Meaningful Roles and Responsibilities | Level of Leadership Development and Skill Building |
|--|--|---|---|
| <i>Youth Led</i> | Youth make all decisions; they may or may not consult adults. | All roles and responsibilities developed and carried out by youth. Older youth may mentor younger youth. | High |
| <i>Youth/Adult Partnerships</i> | Decision making is shared. Planning and designing activities is shared by youth and adults equally. Differences are negotiated between youth and adults. | All roles and responsibilities are shared by youth and adults equally or are based on skills and interests. | High |
| <i>Adult Led with Youth Consulted</i> | Youth input is sought, but adults make the final decision. | Youth have medium to high levels of responsibility. The significance of the activity is medium to high. Youth help define and create choices with approval of adults. | Medium to High |
| <i>Adult Led, with Youth Interests Considered</i> | Some choices are offered to youth by adults, but no input is sought. Youth have little role in decision making. | Responsibility is low and level of meaningful involvement may be low. Adults decide if, how, and when the youth participate. | Low |
| <i>Adult Led, with Youth Given Token Roles</i> | No real decision making power. | No meaningful role provided. Youth participate primarily so adults can say they have youth present. | Low to Nonexistent |
| <i>Adult Led, with Youth as "Objects" (Passive Participants)</i> | Youth have no decision making power. | Youth are not given any meaningful roles. Adults provide services to youth. | Nonexistent |