

# Youth Program Startup Guide

*Setting up an  
effective  
youth  
program that  
honors youth  
voice &  
lived-  
experience*

# Background

As the youth movement continues to expand, there has been an increased interest in youth voice and youth engagement strategies nationwide. Adult systems often provide services which do not align with the clinical profiles of youth and young adults, negatively impacting young peoples' ability to engage in mental health care (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007; Pottick, Warner, Stoep, & Knight, 2013). When experiencing personal challenges, youth and



young adults tend to seek informal supports such as friends, family, or other significant adults, rather than from traditional mental health professionals (Rickwood, et al., 2007). Because existing services and systems may not adequately attract, engage, and serve young people, there has been an emergence of youth-run programs and organizations. Youth-run organizations are run by and for youth with lived experience. These youth have personal knowledge of the strengths and limitations of existing services and systems (Masselli & Bergan, 2018). Like other adult, peer-run organizations, programs operated by youth provide nontraditional services and supports that augment more formal mental health services. Peer-run services are diverse, but research has identified four basic functions: mutual support, community building, service delivery, and advocacy (SAMHSA, 2011). These types of



programs are uniquely positioned to promote resilience and wellness of young people with mental health challenges and serve as a bridge between youth and traditional mental health services. There are many benefits to youth engagement. Youth-run programs can offer support to communities in doing this important work! Whether it's grassroots or from a local, state or federally funded level, the purpose of this guide is to provide practical considerations when starting youth-run programs and organizations.

# Understanding Youth Engagement

Seek opportunities for young people and adult allies to work together and create mental health systems that are rooted in the preferences of youth with lived experiences. In order to do that, it is helpful to understand that youth involvement falls along a spectrum.



**Youth-Guided:** Youth and adult partners are aware and engaged as they explore the ideas and skills of youth leadership and begin to value youth experience as integral to the decision-making process.



**Youth-Directed:** Youth begin to make recommendations and fill steady, meaningful roles in decision-making bodies. Youth and adults collaborate to create and prioritize goals and develop strategies for positive change.



**Youth-Driven** builds upon youth guided and directed, moving toward power being equitably shared with youth, and youth taking a role in decision making. When we build an environment, which allows youth-driven practice to thrive, youth develop the self-awareness and skills to initiate change, and experience intrinsic motivation and sense of purpose to follow through. When youth-driven care is embraced, youth have a mutually respectful relationship with adults and other youth in the community

# Hart's Ladder of Participation

Youth engagement is most successful when it is authentic and supported by youth-adult partnerships. The question is, what makes youth engagement “authentic?” For many years, systems, agencies, and organizations have struggled to achieve engagement that supports decision-making opportunities and meaningful positions for young people. The failure for true partnership often begins when adults and youth are inadequately prepared to work together as equal partners. In some case, this is due to pre-existing attitudes of both adults and youth. Hart’s Ladder of Participation provides a framework for thinking about young people’s participation and engagement in community-based efforts, programs, and/or systems reform and can be one way of assessing whether you are truly partnering with young people.

## Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



**Rung 8:** Young people and adults share decision-making

**Rung 7:** Young people lead and initiate action

**Rung 6:** Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people

**Rung 5:** Young people consulted and informed

**Rung 4:** Young people assigned and informed

**Rung 3:** Young people tokenized\*

**Rung 2:** Young people are decoration\*

**Rung 1:** Young people are manipulated\*

\*Note: Hart explains that the last three rungs are *non-participation*

The ladder isn't intended to suggest that we always have to be at the top rung of the ladder, but rather that we strive to get out of the lower rungs of non-participation. For example, there may be certain contexts in which higher levels of participation aren't appropriate. There are real-life situations where different circumstances call for different levels of participation. In some cases, a lower level of participation may be necessary for preparing both youth and adults to move further up the ladder and have more authentic partnerships. As you develop your youth-group, you can use Hart's Ladder as a guide to ensure you are being as youth-driven as possible. It can also help you to navigate future partnerships with other organizations. Authentic engagement

Hart's ladder is a useful tool not only for finding a common language for youth engagement, but also as a self-assessment mechanism and for reflection- what rung is our program on? What rung would we like to get to? And finally, what steps can be taken to reach a higher rung?

of youth is about sharing power and being equal partners- if youth are being tokenized or aren't leading- they aren't being authentically engaged.

## **Establishing Shared Language**

When involving youth and young adults as partners in systems change work, it's important to use terms that are relevant and culturally sensitive. Using common language will encourage stronger partnerships both within your youth-group and with your partners. Ensure the use of strengths-based, person-first language. Below are some recommended terms to use and to avoid.

Terms to Use	Terms to Avoid
<p>Youth</p> <p>Young Adults</p> <p>Young person/people</p> <p>Lived experience</p> <p>Youth Leaders</p> <p>Youth Advocate(s)</p> <p>Died by suicide</p> <p>Pushed out of or left school</p> <p>Person with substance use disorder</p>	<p>Kids</p> <p>Kiddos</p> <p>Mentally “x” age</p> <p>Committed suicide</p> <p>Dropout</p> <p>Addict</p> <p>Ethnic</p>

For more on using language in writing, check out our [Writing & Language Guidelines](#)



# Finding Your Purpose

Youth voices should drive your mission, vision, values, and purpose. Throughout Youth MOVE National’s work supporting the development of youth-run programs and organizations, we have identified trends in the areas of focus youth programs offer to their communities- we call these purpose areas. As you create your program, identifying purpose areas can guide strategic planning, the development of logic models, creation of strategic partnerships, and development of programs and the evaluation process. There is no one right way to form or plan for a youth organization, but the following purpose areas can provide a framework for determining your program’s mission and planned activities:



**Recreation & Peer  
Networking**



**Community  
Involvement & Advocacy**



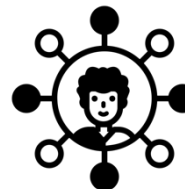
**Social Marketing &  
Awareness Building**



**Youth Voice Development  
& Leadership Training**



**Personal Development &  
Empowerment**



**Youth Peer Support  
Service Delivery**

Be realistic in the number of focus areas you can manage. It can be helpful to prioritize purpose areas both in terms of importance or the urgency of action, but also based on your program’s ability to implement them. Rather than attempting to do too much and spreading your resources too thin, it’s usually better to focus on one or two priority areas and concentrate your efforts on those. Not only will this allow you to do a couple of things really well, it will also help you to experience success early on. Remember, as your program grows, you can always identify additional goals to work towards later.

# Logistics

*Any successful program needs a strong infrastructure. You'll need to think through logistics, fundraising, policy, membership recruitment, program development, identifying allies, and sustainability.*



It's important to think through what resources and materials you'll need to operate a youth program. Before taking on projects or offering programming, establish your infrastructure. If you are unfunded, the first step is to identify potential funding opportunities. If you are offering youth group activities, consider where you will meet, what technology you might need, transportation barriers for participants, and whether there are any requirements to be insured. Addressing these logistical issues will help you provide programming with safety, consistency, and viability. Identifying a space is vital, whether virtual or physical, in order for your program to exist and make things happen! If your program is part of a larger organization, sometimes referred to as a "host organization," make sure you are aware of the policies and procedures you are expected to

follow. If there are policies that restrict your ability to engage youth, for example the office building closing at 5pm, get creative- are there other spaces like a library or another community-based organization you can partner with? Being adaptable and innovative will ensure your program's success!

## Funding

Many youth programs begin with support from locally funded initiatives, like System of Care, Healthy Transitions, Project AWARE, or Statewide Consumer or Family Network Grants. Similarly, programs may access funding from State Mental Health Block Grants, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), philanthropic foundations, or directly from organizations or state agencies. While federal or state grant funding can be an important step in developing a thriving organization, overreliance can impact long-term sustainability. As you begin the process of seeking funding, ask, “Is our current funding so limited that we will be out of business should it be reduced, or even cut? Do we want one funding source to have that much leverage over our program?” (National Empowerment Center & the Recovery Consortium, 2007). Diversifying funding sources is critical to your sustainability.

If you are starting a program with little to no financial backing, fundraising and grant writing are great first steps to begin generating revenue that you can put towards staffing, programming, social marketing, and honorariums. It can be helpful to shift the focus from money to people- how much do you really need to achieve your goals? In addition to seeking funding opportunities, consider how to tap into support of other community-based organizations and who you could partner with- local mental health or substance use programs, faith-based organizations, other youth-run programs, foundations, housing authorities, etc. Be creative and consider who you already know, who your members might know, and who you need to or want to know.

If possible, attend a fundraising and/or grant writing training. Look for in-kind donations (good or services rather than money) or find ways to trade services to help get your program off the ground. For example, look for other organizations that might be able to offer programming, like a “healthy relationships” training or cooking classes, that you can offer to your members. As you begin developing your programming, consider what types

## Fundraising

Fundraising can happen in a lot of ways. Some examples include:

- Car washes
- Tabling events
- Crowdfunding campaigns
- Walk-a-Thons
- T-Shirt fundraisers
- Donation kiosks
- Online donations

of income-producing services your program can offer such as youth engagement or youth peer support training, youth peer support delivery, and consulting. If your program is currently funded and you have the support of a host agency, it is still important that you work with leadership to understand your budget and current funding sources. Youth program staff should have a strong voice in managing the budget and help determine how the money is allocated. Get a sense of what your working budget is for the fiscal year so you can plan for staffing, events, incentives for youth members, and other operating expenses. Identify

who will be the liaison between the adult supporter and youth group members. Remember to keep track of receipts, invoices, and in-kind donations! If your program is interested in having full autonomy over the budget, develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between your program and your host agency. With an MOU in place, you can ensure any money secured by the program stays within its budget. When the program is ready, you might be interested in establishing your own non-profit organization (501c3). For more specific guidance on how to become a non-profit, check out [this resource](#).

## What is an Memoradum of Understanding (MOU)?

MOUs are formal agreements between two or more parties, for example your program and a host organization. They outline the mutually agreed upon expectations and allows all parties to clearly state their objectives and goals.

# Policy

Policy can seem like a scary word. As you develop your program, it can be helpful to think of policies as the governing guidelines of what it means to volunteer, staff, or be a member of your program. What decision-making procedures need to be in place? Having written policies will help you to keep programming aligned with your mission and vision. Consider what policies you need to develop to keep staff and members safe and guide how

## Policies

Some policies to consider:

- Safety protocols
- Stipending
- Transportation
- Inclement weather
- Eligibility for membership
- Work scheduling
- Confidentiality
- Mandated reporting

decisions are made. As a program made up of members and staff with lived experience, it is crucial to create an environment where expectations are clear and there is flexibility to support diverse experiences. Identify what duties and responsibilities are expected of members, volunteers, and/or staff. If you have a host agency, is there a need to develop an MOU? Are there clear communication pathways between you and your host organization, your members, and other community stakeholders? It's important to create a multi-directional feedback

loop to flow from your program, your partners, and your members. People need to be kept informed and up-to-date on what's happening in order to be invested, maintain interest, and feel valued.

# Recruitment

Now it's time to grow your membership! The more youth voice your program has, the more capacity it will have to thrive and reach a shared vision. As a group, discuss what benefits current or potential youth members experience from participation. Having clearly defined benefits and incentives will support your recruitment efforts. It can be helpful to formalize membership in your program, even if it is just having youth sign an agreement on expectations of participation. This can give youth a feeling of commitment and ownership to the program.



**Are there any policies or laws that require getting caregiver consent/permission? If so, you may need to create certain forms such as releases of information, media permission forms, etc.**



Gathering information about membership can be helpful in a lot of ways- it allows you to know how many youth are involved in your program, ensures you are meeting safety requirements, provides a way for updating contact information, and can be helpful when applying for funding or establishing credibility in the community. As you do outreach and recruitment, be mindful about identifying youth voices from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Your program should reflect the community you are working in. Once you have established your program, always consider whether there are any voices or perspectives that are missing from your membership. Things to consider include race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, socioeconomic status, disability status, and more!

**Outreach & recruitment can feel overwhelming! Here are a few tips and tricks that can help with the process:**

- Partner with existing programs and organizations serving youth, for example drop-in centers, afterschool programs, shelters, or jobs programs.

- Go where youth are- both physically and in virtual spaces
- Get connected to local initiatives like System of Care, Project AWARE, Healthy Transitions, etc.
- Perfect your message- having a good elevator speech will make your efforts easier
- Create a safe, welcoming, and affirming space
- Offer regular programming to promote engagement

# Programming

You've gotten to the fun part! This stage is where your program is engaging with the young people you want to serve. Effective youth programming should intentionally enhance life skills, knowledge, social connectedness, and be rooted in positive youth development. There is evidence that youth who have access to a variety of opportunities for positive encounters engage in less risky behavior and transition to adulthood successfully at higher rates (youth.gov, n.d.). As you develop programming, think back on activities and events you participated in and found engaging and meaningful to your personal development. What made the experience memorable? As you create programming, remember to be youth-led! Offering programs and activities that are interesting and directly relates to youths' everyday lives will go a long way in promoting engagement and the retention of participants.

## 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.

# Adult Allies & Partnerships



The success of your program will depend on your ability to develop and nurture relationships and partnerships of all kinds. Partnerships with stakeholders, adult allies, potential funding entities, and policymakers are essential to your long-term sustainability. Each partnership you develop should address core needs and shared goals. It's also important to identify areas where your vision aligns with the efforts of potential partners or if there are similar needs that can be addressed together through a collaboration. Look for partnerships that will be mutually beneficial- these partnerships are full of inspiration, excitement, shared understanding, open communication, and ability to embrace differences in philosophies and work styles. As you develop and/or expand your youth-run program, it can be helpful to find a supportive adult ally. A supportive adult can offer you and your group guidance and mentorship and can be a champion of your efforts. Work with the youth in your group to define what an adult supporter role looks like within your program and how involved you want them to be.

As you consider partnerships and collaborations, it can be helpful to reflect on the following questions:

- Who are potential supporters and allies in your community?
- What are your goals for collaborating with others?
- What needs are you trying to meet through partnerships and collaborations?
- What is the purpose of this partnership?
- Is there mission and value alignment?

## Measuring Success

Once you have programming in place, it's important to develop a mechanism for tracking your efforts and successes! Program evaluation is one way of doing this. Evaluation is a valuable tool that will help you to strengthen the quality of your program and help you to achieve your intended outcomes. Put simply, program evaluation is a process of collecting data and information that helps you to understand what is and is not working. It also helps you to understand the impact your program is having! Evaluation findings can demonstrate to your community and current and potential funders that your program is worth investing in. Don't be intimidated- evaluation designs can be simple and straightforward. Ask your adult supporter to help you develop a strategy for collecting the data you need to show your program's effectiveness. There are also existing resources and templates for including youth voice in evaluation.

Oftentimes young people are excluded from the evaluation process. Include youth in designing tools and practices for data collection and documentation. Some young people may be wary about participating in evaluation because of previous negative experiences within youth-serving systems; however, by including authentic youth voice in all aspects of evaluation, including the design of surveys and methods, in the review of feedback received, and in any efforts to implement meaningful changes as a result of feedback, you can earn trust while leveraging their expertise to gain deeper insights into how policies and practices affect them.

## Evaluating Youth Voice in Your Program

Many youth-serving programs identify their efforts as being youth-led or youth-driven; however, it is important that young people themselves assess the success of a program's efforts. To ensure your program and organization are authentically youth-driven, we encourage the use of the Assessment of Youth/Young Adult Voice at the Agency Level (Y-VAL). The Y-VAL is a validated tool that is intended to measure support for the meaningful participation of youth and young adults in advising and decision-making at the organizational level. The assessment was co-developed with young people and identifies youth-driven best practices across eight key areas:



**Overall vision & commitment**



**Collaborative approach**



**Empowered representatives**



**Commitment to facilitation & support of youth participation**



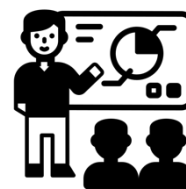
**Workforce development & readiness to ensure meaningful participation**



**Participation in developing programming & policies**



**Participation in evaluation & ensuring program quality**



**Leading initiatives and projects**

You can find more information about how to access the Y-VAL [here](#).

# Resources

## **Youth MOVE National**

- Start a Chapter and join the network!
- Technical assistance
- Youth Advocate Leadership Academy Training
- Publications and Blogs

## **Youth MOVE Peer Center**

- Youth-run program support
- Youth Peer Support
- Youth leadership development
- Professional development & education opportunities
- Annual Learning Community

## **A Guide to Youth Recruitment**

## **Building Effective Youth Adult Partnerships**

## **Evidence Brief Best Practices for Youth-Led Program Planning & Implementation & Examples of Positive Change from Youth-Led Models**

## **Facilitator's Guide for Participatory Evaluation With Young People**

## **Grants.gov Youth Funding Opportunity Grants**

## **Youth-Adult Partnerships in Evaluation: A Resource Guide for Translating Research into Practice**

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