

Making SAG Membership Meaningful

OPPORTUNITIES FOR UTILIZING THE EXPERTISE OF YOUTH MEMBERS

Recruiting, selecting, and training youth members for your organization or state advisory group (SAG) are essential first steps in building youth engagement. However, keeping youth involved may prove to be more challenging. Because youth have many demands on their time, identifying meaningful projects, roles, and functions for youth in the larger group is essential. Roles for youth members can include all those accessible to all members and opportunities unique to youth members. Below are a few suggestions on how this can be done in a way that honors the talent of youth and their unique place in the world. These suggestions come directly from current and former youth SAG members.

Site Visits With Youth Panels or Roundtables

SAGs and DSAs are charged with listening to the experiences of young adults, including those with juvenile justice experience. Youth members can serve as ambassadors for gathering such perspectives by helping connect to other young people through site visits to youth serving facilities and programs. Instead of simply touring a program, spend time with those participating in the program through an activity, meal, panel, or roundtable discussions. Youth members can help other youth feel comfortable sharing, develop questions or discussion topics, and facilitate the activity. Once feedback is gathered, collaborate with youth members on ways to apply the perspectives gathered, such as changes policies or practices and development of three-year plans.

Essential Supports:

- Connection to facility or program staff leads via email or in-person introductions
- Information sought by agency or group for building questions or discussion topics
- Appropriate time on the meeting agenda
- Strategic sharing training for youth on roundtables or panels, so sharing does harm the youth
- Facilitation training or review for youth members
- Thank-you gifts and/or gift cards for all youth involved

Hold Focus Groups or Community Forums

Consumer research is an essential business practice that is often underutilized by nonprofit and government agencies. Focus groups and community forums provide mechanisms for vetting programs or policies and gathering feedback on community needs and strengths. When combined with youth members' connections to diverse, often difficult to reach pockets of people within a community, such focus groups and forums become even more powerful. Youth can build event planning and facilitation

skills while the DSA and SAG gains valuable, diverse insight into community wants and needs. Allowing the “ask” to the community to come from a non-government person can relieve feelings of mistrust.

Essential Supports:

- Identification of topics to be covered
- Identify the focus group audience(s) (e.g., parents, businesses, young adults, policymakers, etc.)
- Facilitation training or review for youth members
- Assistance in reserving location(s) and any needed audio-visual equipment
- Help generate a budget and find funding to support consortiums including constrictions such as purchasing food or providing honorariums
- Staff support in compiling information gathered
- Follow-up time on an agency or committee meeting agenda to present findings and identify next steps

Facilitate Annual Events or Awards

Many agencies and committees give annual awards or scholarships that celebrate the impact of young leaders and professionals in the juvenile justice field. Youth members’ connections to peers and their involvement in many of the community programs in which potential nominees work provide an opportunity to recognize people who may be overlooked otherwise. Additionally, a recipient receiving an award from peers or consumers amplifies the impact of the acknowledgment.

Essential Supports:

- Access to budget information for aiding in planning the award ceremony
- Place in award marketing, selection and event planning discussions
- Share example applications or award criteria or give youth the freedom to establish award criteria
- Assistance in developing an evaluation rubric
- Connection to professional networks to promote the award or scholarship

Set Roles in Every Meeting

Professionals develop confidence in meetings and business settings through repeated exposure and opportunities to speak up, lead, and learn. Ensure that meetings, conversations, and events are open to youth members. Include opportunities throughout a meeting for youth to do more than sit and listen. These opportunities may include providing updates, icebreakers, or feedback or facilitating decision making. Do not limit youth to “go-to,” or easy things. Expand your thinking on how youth could lead by comparing the group’s needs to the youth members’ talents or interests. Beyond enhancing a youth member’s competency, setting the role of youth members challenges the group to make its culture more youth friendly.

Essential Supports:

- Holding preparation and debrief meetings with youth for every meeting

- Collaborating with each youth in identifying desired role
- Thank young leaders for their contributions, celebrate their successes, and help process mistakes
- Addressing any direct or indirect resistance to youth members' roles
- Making youth members' roles a priority, not an "extra" agenda item

Review and Co-Develop Policy or Practice Standards

Policies and practices are often rooted in research, data, and model programs. Using young people to evaluate and review these standards adds a layer of real-world application. What may work in theory may conflict with the intricacies of the target community or population. Discussing programs, procedures or policies with youth allows for modifications or adaptations to be made before implementation begins, which can increase how the changes will be received by consumers.

Essential Supports:

- Key definitions or system element explanations
- A resource person to answer questions
- Appropriate time for review and group discussion
- Follow-up on final decisions and how youth feedback was used

Grant Review

Everyone approaches grant review with a lens that is colored by their experiences. For professionals, this lens is largely affected by professional roles. For youth, it is heavily weighted with personal experiences, including time spent participating in community programming. This first-hand expertise offers an authentic and practical review of grant applications.

Essential Supports:

- Key definitions or system element explanations
- A resource person to answer questions
- Necessary time to review applications
- Include youth in discussions where their feedback is taken seriously, and they are honestly engaged

Program Evaluation

Outside, practical review of programs keeps services sharp and purposeful. Provide such opportunities through surveys, exit evaluations, or outside youth "test-running" a service. Openly listen to youth without judgement, even when the feedback is difficult to hear. Ensure that youth have a safe environment where they can be honest without fear of repercussions. This may require the use of a neutral third-party evaluator. Using youth as program evaluators serves as a unique tool for grant-making agencies to review the programs they fund in a first-hand fashion that adds qualitative information to the quantitative information provided by data.

Essential Supports:

- Evaluation criteria
- Sufficient time to debrief or complete feedback
- Honorarium or travel reimbursement, if youth are “testing” services, as this may be time consuming
- Confidential feedback option
- Information about how the feedback will be used

Internship or Job Opportunities

Young adults who join Student Advisory Groups (SAGs) have a passion and curiosity for juvenile justice work. Their desire to volunteer their time to move juvenile justice forward could be a strong asset to any Designated State Agency (DSA) or youth-serving agency. Amplify their SAG membership to a career pathway by creating or connecting youth members to internship or entry-level positions where they can apply their personal experience and pursue their professional ambitions. Consider advocating for paid internships to make them more accessible to all youth members, despite socioeconomic status.

Essential Supports:

- Identify internship or job opportunities and personally connect the youth leader to the point of contact for the internship or job.
- Assist in capturing SAG and other experience in a résumé or cover letter.
- Offer to practice interview questions.
- Write a letter of reference.
- Advocate for and facilitate the process to fund an internship or position within your DSA. Explore state and federal funding opportunities, such as [Serve America Act](#) funding.
- Follow up with young adults as they apply for and start their new position. Help them navigate their new professional environment.

Awareness or Educational Events

Does your three-year plan include educational or awareness activities? If so, these events provide an opportunity to promote youth-adult partnerships by having youth leaders and professionals serve as co-trainers. Writing for blogs, recording podcasts, or developing other awareness materials can be done outside of work or school hours, making the opportunity more manageable for youth members. Using the voice of young leaders in your awareness activities further promotes the [Juvenile Justice Reform Act’s](#) call to include and acquire youth voice. It can also make the materials relatable to a larger audience, while building the youth member’s résumé and applying their experience. If you are partnering with youth on training, as co-trainers, rather than sharing their personal story.

Essential Supports:

- Include youth members in brainstorming sessions about how materials should be created (e.g., as a podcast, a written piece, a blog, a video, some form of art, etc.) and what they will cover (stories, literature reviews, data, etc.).
- Provide clear expectations for the topic and any boundaries on the medium to be used (written, blog, podcast, video) or the materials to be produced, if known.
- Offer examples.
- Provide access to space or equipment.
- Connect youth to communications or marketing professionals in your organization.
- Offer feedback or work with them on materials.
- Collaborate on the development of training materials.
- Have practice training sessions and provide feedback after each session.
- Connect youth to strategic sharing resources, like this one from the [Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs](#) to ensure that any sharing of their personal story is done safely.

Advocates

Youth participation in a group or program is often voluntary and/or driven by personal passions. This passion, along with a lack of allegiance to a specific organization, profession, or other entity places young adults in a strategic position as advocates. Further, for adults, advocating or providing education about potential legislation may be conflicts of interest. Committees and organizations that elevate youth to the role of advocate give youth a powerful and purposeful role that can have a significant impact on organization or committee goals, all while filling an essential need. Advocacy opportunities also promote civic engagement skills and a passion for life-long engagement in young adults.

Essential Supports:

- Sufficient background information on the issues and persons with whom they will speak
- Help developing informational materials
- Assistance in contacting decision-makers, setting meetings, and planning awareness activities
- Opportunities to practice and debrief while ensuring that coaching occurs

- Training on the legislative or policy process.



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