

# Youth Engagement Strategies and Support (YESS)

## Recruiting Youth and Sustaining Engagement

### Youth Engagement Matters

Communities and organizations are increasingly acknowledging the need to work with youth and young adults as partners to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, authenticity, and reciprocity. Any clinic, school, national, or community program can engage young people in respectful, mutually beneficial ways. In support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Substance Use Prevention grantee community, learning generated through YESS presents an opportunity to shift current thinking about substance use prevention and early intervention. Young people have a unique part to play in substance use prevention, including within Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) – a key strategy of focus among grantees. This increasingly means that roles for youth and young adults are transforming from service recipient to active participant or service partner and even to program developer and service provider. Wherever a program falls on this continuum, there is an opportunity to enhance work with youth in a mutually beneficial way.

**In this Brief: Recruiting youth and creating opportunities that sustain interest and engagement is key for youth-serving organizations.**

### Recruitment Strategies

It is common for organizations to ask where and how best to recruit youth. Commonly cited challenges include identifying interested young people, engaging with minors due to parental consent requirements, and scheduling around school and extra-curricular activities. Targeting existing activities or groups (e.g., community youth advisory boards, nominees from sub-grantees, or participants in positive youth development activities) as a pre-screened pool of youth is a helpful starting point and allows access to a much larger network of potential youth partners. Social media and youth-led messaging also has immense potential to involve a broader network of youth. Youth-led communications will speak directly to peers more effectively than adults. Youth are adept at navigating popular social media channels. Video and other multimedia, as well as targeted messaging, can

be youth-friendly strategies to engage and recruit. Making connections to youth-serving organizations will also help to reach youth. Keep in mind the importance of reaching youth beyond those already actively engaged. Once the recruitment mechanisms have been established, there are several considerations to keep in mind to foster meaningful and sustainable youth engagement.

### Ensure Diversity and Inclusion: Young People are Not Homogeneous

Youth that are recruited to represent a wider community of adolescents or young adults should be truly representative, diverse in multiple ways, and connected to their communities. Culturally competent strategies for youth engagement will depend on the specific cultural landscape where the program or initiative is taking place. However, sample strategies include: leveraging social networks of youth to recruit members from similar backgrounds, inviting youth to share their own lived experience, or granting youth partners opportunities to select preferred gender pronouns. Agencies already working with youth might consider creating a youth advisory council or board and conducting focus groups about how to be more culturally competent. It is important for younger and inexperienced youth to get the chance to lead, rather than only hearing from those who have been consistently and actively engaged before.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is essential to respect that youth are diverse, coming from different levels of maturity and engagement, and to tailor opportunities so they are accessible to all.

*“Find young people who have trouble connecting. Young people have a lot of demands on them that limit their opportunity for ongoing engagement. Engage young people who don't have another outlet. It's not just the 'stars.'”*

*—Stakeholder Interview*

## Avoid Tokenism

Tokenism occurs when participation is “for show” or when young people have little or no influence. Tokenism can take on many forms, from operational approaches to stereotyping – even among well-intentioned agencies. For example, youth may be identified for extremely narrow roles, such as presenting at a conference, without having meaningfully contributed to the presentation or the program being shared.

Some youth have experienced tokenism when cast as a symbol or representative of all youth or as an example of someone who has defied stereotypes of their racial or ethnic group. Alternatively, youth may feel pressured to embody a stereotype or manufacture particular experiences (including risk behavior) to meet the expectations of adult partners. To avoid tokenism, create spaces where youth are able to advocate for themselves, express their whole identities and honest perspectives, and be trusted to rise to high expectations – rather than underestimating their potential.

*“I’ve encountered this a couple of times, mostly because I’m African-American, and most people don’t see us as focused or actively involved in the community, so [my involvement] is surprising to people...it feels like they’re gloating about me because I am defying the stereotype..”*

—Youth Focus Group

### — CASE EXAMPLE: COMMUNITY CATALYST —

Community Catalyst, a grantee of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s Substance Use Prevention (SUP) Initiative, engages youth using a multi-faceted approach. The organization works with state and local advocacy groups, providing technical assistance and subgranting funds to support partners in achieving their policy advocacy goals. Community Catalyst encourages awardees to include youth in meaningful roles in their projects. Youth advocacy, where young people are encouraged to share their experiences and expertise to improve legislation and practices around issues directly impacting their lives, is a common method. Community Catalyst’s cautions against inadvertently tokenizing young people when asking youth to tell their stories. They advise that youth be “*taken care of, but not taken advantage of*” when involved in advocacy. A balance of autonomy and guidance is key.

To prepare youth to tell their stories in an effective way, Community Catalyst advises:

1. **Meet youth where they are.** Allow youth to express themselves according to their interests, skills, and comfort levels. For example, some youth may want opportunities to share their story in person, at schools or in front of legislators, while others may feel more comfortable working with alternative formats, such as a blog, PhotoVoice, or podcast where they may be able to protect their anonymity or avoid follow-up questions.
2. **Remove logistical barriers to participation.** Hold meetings in locations that are accessible by public transportation or close to schools. Libraries are often a good central (and free) location. School schedules ebb and flow more than many others; finals, breaks, holidays and graduation season may require some flexibility.
3. **Facilitate ample training so youth feel prepared.** This could be a formal training session on substance use disorders and how to tell their stories effectively, allowing time to practice, and creating an environment that feels supportive so they can be vulnerable sharing personal experiences.
4. **Incentivize the experience.** Whether through school credit, professional development opportunities, or monetary stipends, organizations should value the effort and time youth expend.
5. **Prepare for the experience.** Consider bringing youth to the space where they will be sharing and practicing their talk. It will reduce anxiety.
6. **Train adults.** Prepare the adult audience for the event. Send guidelines for the questions they may or may not ask based on what the young person is comfortable with and advise if posting pictures or identifying information on social media is acceptable.
7. **Assess your goals:** The amount of preparation that goes into youth advocacy is significant, so it is important to be strategic when identifying events and formats for spreading a message or campaign. Balance costs and benefits considering the limited free time available to many young people.

## Foster and Sustain Meaningful Engagement

Below are several themes and strategies that help initiate and maintain engagement of young people, including finding personal motivation and a sense of ownership, financial and other types of incentives, and building relationships:

**Why:** Many youth identify their motivation for engagement as personal, direct experience with substance use among families or friends. Engaging with youth on an issue of personal and community importance<sup>2</sup> with relevance to the work of adult partners ensures that both parties share compatible levels of motivation and investment in the process and outcomes.<sup>3</sup> One suggestion is to begin with a question such as, “Why are you here?” Helping young people identify “why” will help clarify goals and enhance resulting commitment and engagement level.

**Ownership:** “Pride of ownership” has a motivating effect – the more you can put young people in the driver’s seat, the more commitment they will bring. Part of this ownership comes with holding youth to high expectations. Youth will rise to expectations set for them, and low expectations will result in low engagement and buy-in. Adults should provide youth support as well as autonomy by allowing them to come up with ideas and then coming together to plan how to move forward.

**Financial incentives:** Stipends, transportation reimbursement, and food at meetings can all help to initiate and maintain early commitments from young people. Financial incentives can be given in a stepwise way based on level of experience and role. For example, perhaps focus group participants or board members are not provided stipends, but targeted project work or other activities warrant payment. Building these incentives into program budgets at the outset will ensure they are available when needed.

**Other incentives:** Social connectedness, professional development, and a sense of ownership are as, or more, meaningful than financial incentives. To maintain engagement, it can be helpful to start small and if it goes well, young people will recruit others and stay engaged. Working with young people to develop something tangible – something they and external stakeholders can see – becomes an incentive in and of itself. Further, fostering social and enjoyable connections among peers and to the work facilitates a self-sustaining level of engagement. In addition, all successes and achievements should be recognized along the way.

**Establish relationships:** Offering staff time to support youth, provide ongoing outreach, and thoughtfully maintain engagement is key. Youth engagement will not sustain itself on its own – it needs to be actively cultivated. Staff build relationships with youth, maintain engagement, listen and respond to recommendations, communicate with decision-makers, facilitate recruitment and outreach, and conduct evaluation. In school settings, a dedicated staff liaison will be able to build relationships, evaluate meaningful engagement, and communicate with decision-makers. Foster an environment of learning that is challenging yet structured and support-



*“If adults gave teens the steering wheel or had them lead a conversation or project, it would establish trust and increase engagement.”*

*—Youth Focus Group*

*“Incentives may start with money, but as they see the impact of their work and the connections they’ve made, the incentive becomes something else. Seeing real change is motivating.”*

*—Stakeholder Interview*

ive. A feeling of community and mutual relationships of respect and value can help.<sup>4</sup> Establishing a clear timeline of engagement and providing regular feedback so youth feel incentivized to reach set project milestones are also important.<sup>5</sup>

**Commit resources:** Beyond staff time, financial resources are necessary to facilitate successful youth engagement. Financial resources pay for the necessary staff time, as well as incentives and stipends that encourage youth to show up. Yet, it is important to intentionally allot the necessary resources during planning. When youth engagement is not an explicit goal of funded work, carving out time and resources is not feasible. Time is another critical resource for success. Ample time is needed to plan and implement a project that engages with youth at several stages and elicits their input in shared decision-making. Having sufficient time available for youth is also imperative to developing strong and trusting relationships.<sup>6,7,8,9</sup>

## Create Roles for Youth

Engaging youth in a step-wise approach yields significant value for youth engagement, as does respecting the range of skills, commitment, and expertise of young people. Below are several potential roles for youth, depending on interests, skills, goals, and needs. Some may be “outside the box” compared to traditional thinking. Regardless of the specific title or responsibilities, the YESS Youth Advisory Board recommends that role creation and development be a youth-led endeavor, based on youth interests and perceived skill and confidence level. In this way, roles are not so much assigned as mutually agreed upon with opportunities to grow and change as the partnership gains momentum.

**Ambassadors:** Youth may serve as “ambassadors” for a program or initiative, which could include actively leading educational and outreach campaigns, promoting the initiative and recruiting other youth, engaging with community stakeholders and partner organizations, and training peers.

**Researchers:** Youth – once trained – can take on tasks in community-based research projects, particularly on issues that directly affect them, including interviewing peers, developing surveys, conducting data collection and analysis, and presenting findings in reports and at conferences.

**Trainers:** Youth can contribute to developing training curricula to prepare adult-led organizations to engage other youth and be employed as trainers. By working with young people as trainers, not only is the organization able to ensure the youth’s perspective and expertise will come through, but the young person also has access to a unique professional development and leadership opportunity. Adults can ask questions of the young person to gain their insights in a way that would be impossible when the training is delivered by adults. Youth can develop public speaking skills, learn about their strengths as trainers or educators, and build experience.

**Consultants:** Similarly, some organizations work with youth as consultants. This model helps to leverage a young person’s unique interests and comfort level, allows flexibility with their time, and helps youth develop specific

*“Ending on a high note with youth will encourage them to come back – whether it is bringing them to a conference, recognizing them for their work in front of other professionals, or rewarding them with more responsibility.”*

—Youth Advisory Board

*“Engaging with (our youth hire) as a partner really keeps me on my toes. I feel very committed to living up to her expectations. They believe us and trust us as partners. As a result, I’m doubly committed to making our mission work.”*

—Stakeholder Interview

areas of expertise. For example, a busy young person who has expertise in social media outreach to youth and is trained in adult consultation can be called upon as needed for community-based consultation. In this way, the young person can continue to engage in the program, develop a new skill set, provide a service in the community, and fit the work manageably into their schedule. Depending on the specific scenario, youth can either be engaged in an ongoing manner, in a specific role on a Youth Advisory Council, or on an ad hoc basis as needs arise.

**Staff Members:** As organizations build relationships with young people, many have begun employing those that demonstrate passion, availability, and skills in more formalized roles including as regular staff and interns. These more formalized roles help create organizational change as youth contribute across tasks and departments; foster professional development opportunities for youth; and establish ongoing dialogue among youth and adults. Some organizations hire youth for the specific purpose of leading and supporting their youth engagement efforts. In one example, a Youth Leadership team is comprised of a Youth Advisory Board, a young adult who began as a youth advisory board member and now serves in a full-time capacity, and an adult counterpart to advise, guide, and support.

**Fellows:** Fellowships establish a structure that is flexible to the needs and interests of youth and the organization and can help offer a more formal incentive for college or professional applications. Like consultants, fellows are able to more easily manage expectations and workload while maintaining a more formal role among organizational leadership and staff.

Youth engagement benefits youth, adults, programs, and communities. As described in this brief, the roles and opportunities for youth are varied. Using best practices for recruiting youth and sustaining engagement will ensure a positive experience for all involved.



*The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation recognizes that SBIRT for adolescents has historically been developed, implemented, and informed by adult perspectives. In an effort to bring youth and young adult voices to the Strategic Initiative and transform how we think about substance use prevention and early intervention, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation is partnering with the Center for Social Innovation (C4) to explore current status and potential opportunities for youth engagement with grantees. Youth Engagement Strategies and Support (YESS) leverages the learning of pioneers in youth engagement and explores how these lessons can be applied to adolescent substance use prevention and early intervention. Please refer to additional briefs on Defining and Understanding the Benefits of Youth Engagement, Planning for Youth Engagement, and Bringing Youth Voice to SBIRT for more insight from the YESS project.*

<sup>1</sup> Kara, N. (2007). Beyond tokenism: Participatory evaluation processes and meaningful youth involvement in decision-making. *Children Youth and Environments*, 17(2), 563-580.

<sup>2</sup> Theriault, D. (2013). Creating Successful Partnerships between Marginalized Youth and Adults. Sequor Youth Development Initiative Research Brief.

<sup>3</sup> Soleimanpour, S., Brindis, C., Geierstanger, S., Kandawalla, S., & Kurlaender, T. (2008). Incorporating youth-led community participatory research into school health center programs and policies. *Public Health Reports*, 123(6), 709-716.

<sup>4</sup> Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Developmental Science*, 8(2), 75-90.

<sup>5</sup> Soleimanpour, et al., 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Jacquez, F., Vaughn, L. M., & Wagner, E. (2013). Youth as partners, participants or passive recipients: A review of children and adolescents in community-based participatory research (CBPR). *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(1-2), 176-189.

<sup>7</sup> Mance, G. A., Mendelson, T., Byrd III, B., Jones, J., & Tandon, D. (2010). Utilizing community-based participatory research to adapt a mental health intervention for African American emerging adults. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*, 4(2), 131-140.

<sup>8</sup> Mathews, J. R., Mathews, T. L., & Mwaja, E. (2010). "Girls take charge": a community-based participatory research program for adolescent girls. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*, 4(1), 17-24.

<sup>9</sup> Zeldin, S., Krauss, S. E., Collura, J., Lucchesi, M., & Sulaiman, A. H. (2014). Conceptualizing and measuring youth-adult partnership in community programs: A cross national study. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54(3-4), 337-347.