



ADVISE AND ADVANCE: ELEVATING THE YOUTH VOICE THROUGH YOUTH ADVISORY BOARDS



TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY-LEVEL SUBSTANCE MISUSE

HOW TO BUILD AND SUSTAIN A YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

WHY LAUNCH A YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD?

Any work that strives to serve and advocate for a particular group or cause should always provide a seat at the table for representatives who belong to that community, including young people. Because of their age or assumed “lack of experience,” it is easy to dismiss the contributions of youth in developing policies and programs. However, their energy, insight, and innovation make them valuable assets and contributors to any project or program, especially if it involves issues that directly affect youth and their peers. This is particularly true for youth who have lived experience with opioid use disorder (OUD) and other substance use disorders (SUDs), directly or indirectly. For instance, youth who may not be directly misusing substances but are impacted by parental OUD or SUDs or community-wide SUDs. Community stakeholders who are working on a systems level to ameliorate the effects of OUD and other SUDs may miss important policy considerations if youth voice is not included and employed.

One way to incorporate youth voice is by starting a youth advisory board (YAB) that is focused on addressing OUD and other SUDs in the communities where youth are impacted. A YAB provides youth and organizations the chance to work with one another in a safe and structured manner. If done authentically and driven by a clear purpose, a YAB can not only instruct an organization’s goals but also offer youth opportunities to develop professional skill sets, such as networking, problem-solving, marketing, advocacy, and policy development. In addition, a YAB offers an authentic and inclusive way to increase public awareness and community engagement.

This technical assistance brief (TAB) provides suggestions and guidance to build and sustain a YAB that addresses opioids and other SUDs in their communities. The TAB includes guidance on:



FRAMEWORK

The first step in developing a YAB is designing a clear framework. Knowing the why and how of your YAB from the start is crucial to its success and sustainability. Work to define the objectives of your YAB and discuss with all stakeholders what is essential to meeting these goals. If possible, include a young person when first establishing your board and conceptualizing your framework.

Determine the Purpose

Clearly articulating the purpose of the YAB from the start will help cement a strong foundation for your board and institute a focal point for developing goals, objectives, and activities. In addition, it ensures that you are utilizing the YAB in a manner that positively impacts your board and the youth who serve on it.

To effectively determine the purpose of the YAB, spend time prior to recruitment on:



CREATING A MISSION STATEMENT THAT REFLECTS THE GRANT, YAB, AGENCY, OR ORGANIZATION'S GOALS TO REDUCE OR EDUCATE ABOUT SUBSTANCE MISUSE.



CLEARLY DEFINING WHY THESE GOALS NEED THE INPUT OR DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH.

Consider how work from the YAB will impact decisions and policy.



DETERMINING A TIMELINE FOR THE YAB.

Is there a targeted endpoint of the YAB, or will it serve as an ongoing resource for multiple YABs?



ENSURING THAT THE CONFIDENTIALITY OF THE YOUTH IS PROTECTED.

If you are conducting research or evaluations, submit your research plan to your Institutional Review Board.

These steps serve multiple purposes; they can serve as recruitment tools to aid materials that detail what the YAB will accomplish. They can also lay the foundation for a process and outcome evaluation.

Identify Youth Target Population, Qualities, Characteristics, and Size

Once you have a clear understanding of how young people's expertise will be utilized, you can start to determine who should be on your board. Before you start recruiting, be clear about the skills, background, and expertise you are looking for. Identify the population of young people you are interested in including in your YAB by considering the following questions:

- **What specific lived experiences should YAB members have?**
 - Past/current OUD and other SUDs
 - Past/current participation in a sober support group
 - Child welfare involvement
 - Juvenile justice system involvement
 - Parental or guardian OUD or SUDs
- **What age ranges are appropriate for your YAB?**
 - If youth are younger than 18, there are different considerations—parental consent and vetting of adult volunteers to lead the YAB.
 - If youth are between 18 to 25, they will likely have more autonomy to participate in the YAB.
- **What specific skills should YAB members possess?**
 - If youth are reviewing written materials for professionals, what reading level is needed?
 - If youth are in recovery, what skills should they possess to be able to participate fully in the YAB?
- **What roles and responsibilities will the youth have?**
 - For example, developing training curriculum, recruitment, developing/maintaining websites or social media accounts, community outreach, prevention ideas, policy development, organizing sober support activities, public speaking engagements, and educating peers
- **How many young people are needed to meet the mission and goals of the YAB?**
- **How will you ensure representation from a diverse group of young people?**
- **How many young people can you afford to subsidize?**
 - Will the youth receive stipends for participation? Is there funding to support nourishment during meetings?



RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Recruitment is essential to the success of a YAB. Who and how you recruit will determine the sustainability, engagement, and, ultimately, the outcomes of the YAB. Recruiting youth should be done broadly, actively, and on an ongoing basis, as young people's schedules can often shift. Treat recruitment for the YAB the same as you would if you were hiring for your organization.

- **Create an application complete with a job description detailing participation requirements, responsibilities, and benefits/compensation. An application evokes professionalism, which can increase interest and strengthen the applicant pool.**
 - Utilize the criteria you determined in defining the target population.
 - Allow youth multiple means to showcase strengths by offering multiple communication forms within the application: digital, video/audio, or written.
 - *Consider requesting a brief essay or paragraph describing their interest and professional adult references. In addition, consider scheduling short interviews.*
- **Utilize varied marketing tactics: social media, flyers, and word of mouth.**
 - Create materials that are vivid and informative of intent that also demonstrate commitment and detail benefits.
 - Include QR codes, links, or contact information for follow-up questions or additional information.
 - Use youth-friendly language but be professional in tone.
- **Use food as an incentive to join.**
- **Reach out to diverse communities.**
- **Be particularly selective of youth at the conception of your program to build a strong foundation.**
- **Consider hosting a kickoff meeting with food and other incentives to present the purpose of your YAB and answer questions. Then, introduce the application process.**
 - Encourage youth to bring a friend or share the information on their social media.

Partnerships

There are likely direct service providers who are already engaging with the young people within that community. These organizations can serve many important roles in maintaining the YAB: as adult YAB leaders, as funders or sponsors for food and space, and as recruitment and referral sources. Beyond the services they might be able to provide, it is important to recognize these organizations or agencies as part of the fabric of that community and, ultimately, peripheral stakeholders to the work your YAB is doing. It is likely they are contributing to that work already. By reaching out to community-based organizations, you are building upon a foundation instead of trying to recreate the wheel.

- **Identify community partners to collaborate with in this space.**
 - OUD and SUD prevention, harm reduction, interventions, sober supports and recovery, schools, extracurricular programs, college mentorship programs, etc.

- **Determine how partners will work to support the YAB.**
 - Recruitment
 - *Provide them with a script and marketing materials. If possible, volunteer to come and answer questions or give a presentation in person.*
 - *Maintain a contact list for future recruitment.*
 - Provide a safe and neutral space to convene meetings.
 - *Be specific and consistent about meeting needs and schedules.*
 - Co-facilitation of meetings
 - Community outreach
 - Guest speakers
 - Support survey and data analysis or collection
- **Allocate funds to reimburse community partners for their time, expertise, and space.**

ENGAGEMENT AND FACILITATION

Once you have established the parameters and framework, it is crucial to spend just as much time and effort on the curriculum and maintenance of YAB meetings. How you organize the facilitation, activities, and discussions of your meetings will determine the success and sustainability of the YAB. To do this well, you must consider how meetings will be structured and how best to keep youth engaged and their work purposeful.

Meeting Structure

As soon as you have recruited the right young people for your board, you will be eager to get to work. Before you do, however, take some time— ideally before or during your first meeting— to iron out the details of how your meetings will be organized. It is important for your board members to understand the mechanics of your proceedings in order to make them feel more comfortable and poised to spend their time creatively tackling the overall goals and mission of your YAB. It is also good to remember that structure does not mean inflexibility. Like anyone, the schedules of your board members can be disrupted by any number of things, and you want to be sensitive to youth's conditions and environments in relation to their opioid and other SUD circumstances and their own personal situations. That being said, young people from every background thrive better with expectations and structure.

- **Identify meeting frequency and length.**
 - Meeting times should be consistent and dependent on the youth's availability
 - *Be open to meeting after 5:00 p.m. or on weekends*
 - *Be mindful of scheduling conflicts.*
- **For example, finals, graduation, spring or winter breaks, school dances, and sober recovery activities**
 - Plan the number and consistency of meetings according to the goals and timeline of the YAB.
 - *Meetings should be consistent enough to ensure progress but are not burdensome.*
 - *To give your program a running start, consider starting with weekly or biweekly meetings and then moving to monthly meetings once you have made some progress and have an established group.*

- Be accommodating if special absences occur but stress expectations and accountability to peers and the overall mission of the YAB.
 - *Institute an attendance policy reflective of compensation and leadership roles.*
- Once you have set meeting parameters, maintain them long enough to instill a sense of continuity before making changes.
- **Identify an accessible location for youth to meet.**
 - Meetings should be hosted in a safe, neutral, and accessible space.
 - *Consider locations that might already be comfortable or recognizable to youth: schools, local libraries, and community centers.*
 - *Ensure the location is accessible to those with disabilities.*
- **If the location is not in a place where youth regularly meet already, secure transportation options that are feasible in terms of cost and time commitment.**
 - Consider what materials, technology, resources, and nourishment you need or would like to provide.
 - Offer hybrid or virtual meeting opportunities.
- **Establish a means of communication to keep youth informed and updated.**
 - Create a shared calendar.
 - *Schedule milestone dates.*
 - Use communication tools that youth are more familiar with, such as texting or social media, in addition to just emailing.
 - *Services like Remind, Google Voice, or Google Hangouts allow you to use your email address or set up a separate phone number, so you can maintain boundaries and privacy.*
 - *Programs like Slack or Microsoft Teams can establish a communal digital workspace to help organize documents and update youth.*
 - *Set up contact systems, so youth know whom to speak to if they have additional questions or concerns (e.g., if they must miss a meeting, have an emergency, or would like to pose an idea for an upcoming meeting).*
 - *Be mindful of privacy and sharing sensitive information.*
 - *Most importantly, ask youth how they prefer to communicate.*



Staffing

YABs cannot operate in a vacuum; at least one staff member from your organization is needed to coordinate meetings and communicate youth's feedback to the rest of the staff and YAB partners. If additional staff members are deemed necessary, outline their specific roles and duties in maintaining the board and supporting the youth. Staff members will need to build relationships and create a safe space where youth can feel empowered.

- **Identify how much you can invest in the YAB and how much time staff members should dedicate to the maintenance of the YAB.**

- **Select staff members who have experience working with youth and have a high degree of youth cultural competency, commitment, and understanding of OUD and other SUDs.**
 - As much as possible, maintain staff consistency.
 - *Staff transitions are a normal part of business; however, for youth, they can be very disorienting and disruptive to rapport building. If there is going to be a change in the facilitator, coordinate a transition process.*
- **Staff members should receive regular and continuous training on:**
 - Adolescent opioid and other SUD treatment.
 - Recovery services.
 - Adolescent development.
 - Trauma-informed care.
 - Recovery-oriented care.
- **Staff members should be educated on the background, community, and culture of their youth board members.**
- **Provide staff members with appropriate resources to ensure they are available to show up and leave meetings as their full selves.**

Balancing Instruction and Facilitation

Often, adults sharing professional space with youth may not know how to create room for youth leadership and empowerment. They may revert to being a lecturer rather than an instructor or, even better, a facilitator. Young people are incredibly perceptive and recognize condescension even if the intent is well-meaning. For your YAB to be effective to your community, your organization, and the board's mission, the work the youth does must be authentic and respected. Therefore, it is important that adult staff members receive targeted training on how to facilitate youth-led programs.

- **Staff members leading YABs should be provided specific training on how to cultivate youth leadership, share power with youth, and assess internal biases.**
 - Identify youth's strengths and provide opportunities for varied participation.
 - Allow youth authentic opportunities to practice, troubleshoot, and even fail.
- **Include youth in every stage of your YAB development and outreach.**
 - Use the initial meeting to develop YAB norms with your youth.
 - Set the norms and expectations early and often.



- **Youths' viewpoints should be validated and respected.**
 - YAB facilitators should not attempt to translate YAB members' feedback.
 - Ensure youth understand that they can opt-out, say no, and/or discuss options.
 - Respect youth choice.
 - Commit staff members and stakeholders to learning from youth.
- **Youth must be recognized as collaborators and consultants with lived experience.**
 - It must be clearly outlined how youth's participation and contributions will aid in developing change or outreach.
 - Protect youth voice by providing authentic opportunities to share and learn and to avoid turning moments of education into tokenism or voyeurism. This can be retraumatizing.
- **Provide youth training.**
 - Inform youth not only on the purpose of the YAB but also on the past work that has led to the current needs.
 - Develop a handbook or other orientation resources.
 - Use common language.
 - *Provide youth with a list of terminology, jargon, acronyms, and local/state/federal agencies.*
 - *Encourage youth to ask questions as often as necessary.*
 - Adequately prepare youth for speaking engagements or educational leadership.
- **Hold youth accountable to YAB goals and each other.**
 - Institute assessments, reviews, and debriefs.
 - Facilitate peer discussions and reflections.
- **Differentiate the objectives of the YAB from the objectives of your organization.**
 - Provide opportunities for youth to work independently and without influence from your organization.
 - Empower youth to make connections with causes and organizations that are reflective of the YAB goals and are important to them.
 - Organize forms of listening sessions where youth get to lead conversations, and staff members or other stakeholders listen, e.g., a fishbowl.

Facilitation and Engagement Strategies

The quickest way to lose youths' interest is by under-preparing to keep their interest. Take time with your staff members who are working with the youth and youth leaders themselves to plan for your meetings while keeping in mind your mission, objectives, and action plans. Remember again that intentional does not always mean being habitual or predictable. Sometimes, the best ideas come from organic, spontaneous moments. Learn to follow trains of thought or bursts of creativity if they seem like they might lead somewhere fruitful. At the same time, incorporate some type of routine to set expectations and begin cultivating youth ownership. Many of these rules will take time, practice, and knowledge of how your particular board members work best. Just remember that young people, like anyone, are more likely to be immersed if a meeting has a sense of progress and action.

- **Develop agendas that make clear the goals or learning objectives.**

- **To keep meetings meaningful and to meet the needs of the different members of your board, provide variety in activities, discussions, and transitions.**
 - Meetings can focus on team building or activities youth have identified as needed for leadership growth.
 - Group work can be very productive if you are intentional about their outcomes and purpose.
 - Offer several opportunities for youth to reflect, troubleshoot, or plan.
 - Offer multiple means of discussion to ensure all youth have the opportunity to share and be heard.
 - Utilize numerous means of connection or creation.
 - *Youth are known for being more technologically savvy; consider utilizing programs or applications to create products or facilitate conversation.*
 - *Offer artistic forms of expression.*
 - *Do not underestimate the power of paper and pencil.*
- **●Avoid “busy work.” Do not ask youth to develop products that will not be considered or discussed in the progression of goals later.**
 - An exception might be opportunities for self-reflection.
- **Ask youth to identify their skills, strengths, and special abilities.**
- **Make decisions through group discussions and critical analysis rather than a majority vote.**

BUILDING TRUST AND PROVIDING BENEFITS

Fostering and maintaining a sense of trust and respect is essential when establishing a relationship with any young person. This is especially important with youth who may have experienced trauma, some form of abandonment, or working to become sober. While building rapport obviously takes time, it also requires providing opportunities for growth and meeting shared expectations. Most importantly, it takes a commitment from adults to listen, learn, and act on the expertise and insight youth offer. If youth voice is important to your organization’s goals, then it is equally important to develop policies for their voices to be heard and their recommendations to be acted upon.

Building Rapport

Much of rapport building is dependent on developing systems and creating an environment where youth can feel safe and respected. Again, establishing trust takes time in any relationship, so it is important to pay attention and spend time getting to know your youth as a collective group and as individuals. While you want to be equitable in your treatment, it is critical to remember that not all youth react or interact in the same way. Just like you want variety in your activities, you want flexibility and adaptability in your approaches to connection.

- **Create and maintain an environment committed to progress.**
 - Promote a positive culture and be attentive to concerns or conflicts.
 - *Secure a system for youth to feel open to bring up questions or issues.*
 - *Provide a clearly written policy to assure youth that their experience and access to services will not be affected if they offer negative feedback.*
 - Ensure all agencies, staff members, and organizations respect youth insight.

- **Utilize trauma-informed practices.**

- For example, strategic sharing, pre-meeting support, post-meeting debriefs, trigger warnings, privacy reminds, opt-outs, wellness rooms, and recovery supports
- Continue to support and respect youth work even when they are facing challenges related to SUD, OUD, or other personal issues.

- **Learn about youth's interests and activities beyond the YAB.**

- Relationship building is holistic. Relate to your youth as people and not just as collaborators to your organization.

- **Encourage openness and teamwork but maintain boundaries and professionalism.**

- While it is important to push youth to grow, be sensitive to backgrounds.
- Ensure youth have the power to say no or discuss alternatives.
- Preserve appropriate relationships and interactions.
 - *Once rapport has been established, be aware that some youth might become overly attached or affectionate. Developing friendships with youth is rewarding for all parties, but you must remember you are the adult in the situation and thus responsible for mediating appropriate boundaries.*

- **Listen and act.**

- Follow through on decisions and promises made.
- Be timely with youth's feedback and keep them updated.

Youth Benefits

The purpose of a YAB is to gain the insights and perspectives of youth to help develop policy and institute change. Regardless of their age, they are expert consultants with lived experience and should be treated as such. In addition to establishing an authentic and safe workspace, provide youth opportunities to participate in professional development and grow their skill sets. Offer multiple means of reimbursement to compensate youth for their time, efforts, and contributions.

- **Cultivate youth ownership.**

- Establish leadership roles within the YAB.
 - *Provide training and transitions for youth assuming leadership roles.*
- Allow youth to troubleshoot and identify any next steps.
- Give youth opportunities to set the agenda and lead the conversation.
- Create opportunities for youth to provide feedback on skills or topics they wish to learn more about.

- **Pay youth the same as any other consultant or expert, including:**

- Hourly rates instead of minimum wage, daily stipends, and residual income for intellectual property.
- Reimbursement for travel costs or meals.
- Other compensation to reduce barriers, such as parking, transportation, and childcare.

- **Seek additional funding if necessary or limit the number of youth participants to ensure YAB members are compensated fairly.**

- Develop part-time and full-time positions.

- **Ensure there are no barriers to compensation by offering many options:**
 - Housing stipends, cash, gift cards, CashApp, or Venmo
 - Ask youth for their preference.
 - Educate youth on “reportable income” and how to report compensation to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).
- **Offer opportunities for professional development, including:**
 - Networking.
 - Resume building.
 - Internships.
 - Marketing.
 - Policy development.
 - Exposure to other experts or leaders in the field.
 - Continuing education opportunities.
 - Field trips.
 - References or letters of recommendation.

Accountability and Evaluations

The organization should be accountable to the YAB for acting on the recommendations and feedback from the youth. Young people, particularly those who have been systematically failed by the system, may be distrustful that their opinions and viewpoints will be taken seriously by adults. You should be transparent about how exactly youth input will be used and create internal performance measures to demonstrate how it will be utilized. Finally, youth should be given the opportunity to evaluate the performance of the YAB and offer insight on how to utilize the outcomes in their communities and address issues they are knowledgeable about.

- **Provide ongoing expectation setting and training on how the feedback from the YAB is being used, will be used, and the process and timeline of how changes happen outside of the YAB.**
- **Explain the process through which youth feedback will be provided to the rest of the organization.**
- **Design performance measures and an evaluation plan with YAB members.**
 - Conduct surveys and focus groups
 - Qualitative software
 - Reports and dissemination
- **Consistently report back to the youth on how their feedback was implemented or will be implemented.**

Youth may expect more immediate results and changes as a result of their feedback. Be prepared to provide detailed explanations of the future steps that will be taken to incorporate youth input.

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