

Youth Engagement Blueprint Series: Viewing Young People as Organizational Assets



What Is Youth Engagement?

Youth engagement is the intentional, authentic, and sustained involvement of young people in a decision-making activity (Gaughen, Flynn-Khan, & Hayes, 2009). "Viewing Young People as Organizational Assets" is the first in a series of four factsheets that will provide practical advice on how to increase capacity for youth engagement at the organizational level.

Why View Young People as Organizational Assets

Viewing young people as organizational assets means actively engaging with the values, opinions, and skills of the youth and young adults involved in an organization, and reflects a positive youth development approach.

Organizations should look for opportunities to integrate youth and young adults in decision-making, program improvement, policy development, and other important areas.

There are many benefits to viewing young people as organizational assets and drawing on their skills, knowledge, and life experiences to evolve your organization.

Benefits to Organizations	Benefits to Young People in Foster Care
Creates youth buy-in; increases retention and engagement in services	Teaches young people how to take initiative, and builds accountability
Uses young peoples' knowledge and insights to promote developmentally appropriate services	Empowers young people to advocate for themselves
Involves young people in program evaluation for better results	Builds networks, encourages mentorship, and promotes exploration of career paths
Improves an organization's cultural responsiveness	Encourages young people to build professional skills in a professional environment

Benefits to Organizations	Benefits to Young People in Foster Care
Encourages comprehensive understanding of young people and their changing needs in “real time”	Supports resiliency, autonomy, and well-being
Promotes organizational sustainability by attracting new sources of funding	Provides opportunities for leadership, critical thinking, decision-making, and community engagement

How to Build Organizational Capacity

“Capacity” describes the potential of a child welfare system to be productive and effective by applying its human and organizational assets to identify and achieve its current goals.

Building organizational capacity for viewing young people as organizational assets encompasses all five dimensions of capacity building: (1) **Resources**; (2) **Infrastructure**; (3) **Knowledge and Skills**; (4) **Culture and Climate**; and (5) **Engagement and Partnership** (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016).

Building Resources

Includes concrete materials and assets, such as staff, funding facilities, equipment, data collection tools and systems, informational and program materials, curricula, and technology.

- Identify and support “champions” within the organization who will be committed to the training and support of youth employees.
- Involve young people in all training and curriculum development, not just those related to them.
- Develop a specialized hiring/training/onboarding plan to bring young people into the organizational structure and to support their work.
- Integrate young people into service delivery so they are doing the work of providing care and assistance.

“After realizing the impact of meaningful youth engagement, we now employ youth with shared life experience across multiple programs. Their presence and participation at the organizational and direct service level has increased innovation and creativity in programming, which helps to engage and retain participants and leads to better outcomes.”

*—Krysta Esquivel
Associate Executive Director,
YMCA of San Diego County*

Building Infrastructure

Includes organizational structures and processes, such as policies, procedures, governance structures, service array, decision-making processes, practice protocols, training, human resources systems, and quality improvement systems.

- Provide training and support to staff that supervise young people.
- Involve young people in the staff hiring process and in foster parent recruitment and training.
- Include young people in the evaluation of organizational policies, procedures, governance, and outcomes.

- Seek buy-in from institutional leaders to create policies that support youth engagement.
- Develop a fair compensation program for youth employees in your organization, on par with that of other workers.

Building Knowledge and Skills

Includes expertise and competencies, for example, practice knowledge, leadership skills, team building, analytic abilities, and cultural responsiveness.

- Build capacity for engagement with young people by providing adequate job guidance and training. Set them up to succeed—never to fail.
- Recognize young people as experts. Give them a chance to integrate that expertise into programming and training, for example through focus groups, staff meetings, and other activities.
- Break down the stereotypes that adults and young people have about each other to facilitate better communication at your organization.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for States: Youth Development](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway: Youth](#)
- [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#)

Building Culture and Climate

Includes norms, beliefs, values, and attitudes that influence behavior, such as shared vision, goals, morale and motivation, attitudes, openness, and buy-in for new programs and practices.

- Create safe, comfortable spaces for young people to express themselves and to develop leadership skills.
- Work to establish effective youth–adult partnerships that include shared responsibilities, communication, and power sharing.
- Be clear about the goals of organizational youth engagement for both youth and adult participants.
- Increase awareness of and interest in youth feedback through formal and informal processes.

Building Engagement and Partnership

Includes interorganizational and intraorganizational relationships, such as internal teaming, connections, stakeholder involvement, communications, and interagency collaboration.

- Develop youth mentorship programs, internships, externships, and community partnerships.
- Engage networks of young people formerly in foster care to assist with building capacity for youth involvement with your organization and to increase recruitment.
- Connect with organizations that have successfully integrated young people (see sidebar).

Examples of Youth Engagement Programs in the States

The programs below provide useful and varied examples for agencies considering how to build capacity for youth engagement in their own jurisdictions. These programs show some concrete examples of what youth engagement looks like in practice in important areas of capacity building, including obtaining various sources of funding, obtaining buy-in from institutional leadership, recognizing young people as experts, and establishing youth–adult partnerships.

Note: The Capacity Building Center for States does not endorse any particular approach or youth engagement program and included the links below as examples only.

- [California Connected by 25 Initiative's](#) mission statement focuses directly on capacity building, stating that it aims to “build comprehensive transition-aged foster youth supports and services for youth 14 through 24. Through comprehensive assessment, planning and practice innovations developed with youth, caregivers, and other partners, effective strategies are being developed . . . to improve outcomes statewide.”
- [Maryland Connect MYLIFE](#) uses a different, more diffuse model for developing youth engagement that also focuses on building capacity in six key areas: engagement (with youth) to create programming, teaming, assessment, planning, intervention, and monitoring and reassessment. The goal of the program is explicitly to “ensure involvement of youth . . . and to draw on the experience and recommendations of youth to enhance child welfare policy and practice.”
- The mission of the [Vermont Youth Development Program](#) (YDP) is “to ensure that these youth enter adulthood with the necessary supports to build productive and fulfilling lives. YDP invests in current and former foster youth, ultimately promoting healthier and better connected young adults, families, and communities.” YDP focuses less explicitly on capacity building than others, but its 2015 annual report (available on the website) provides a useful representation of the kinds of outcomes that are possible when a State invests in a youth engagement program.
- The [Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board](#) (OHIO YAB) focuses on building legislative infrastructural capacity for youth engagement, another important aspect of building a youth engagement program. The mission states that the “OHIO YAB believes in the power of youth voice, and actively works to establish . . . youth advisory boards. It also works to influence policies and practice that impact current and former foster youth” in a number of focus areas.
- [Maine Youth Leadership Advisory Team](#) (YLAT) provides a great example of a government–university collaboration and the importance of engaging partners outside of child welfare and government—a key component of capacity building. Its mission states that YLAT “is a joint project between Maine’s Youth in Foster Care, [t]he Maine Department of Health and Human Services, and the . . . University of Southern Maine. YLAT is committed to improving outcomes for youth” currently or formerly in foster care.

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