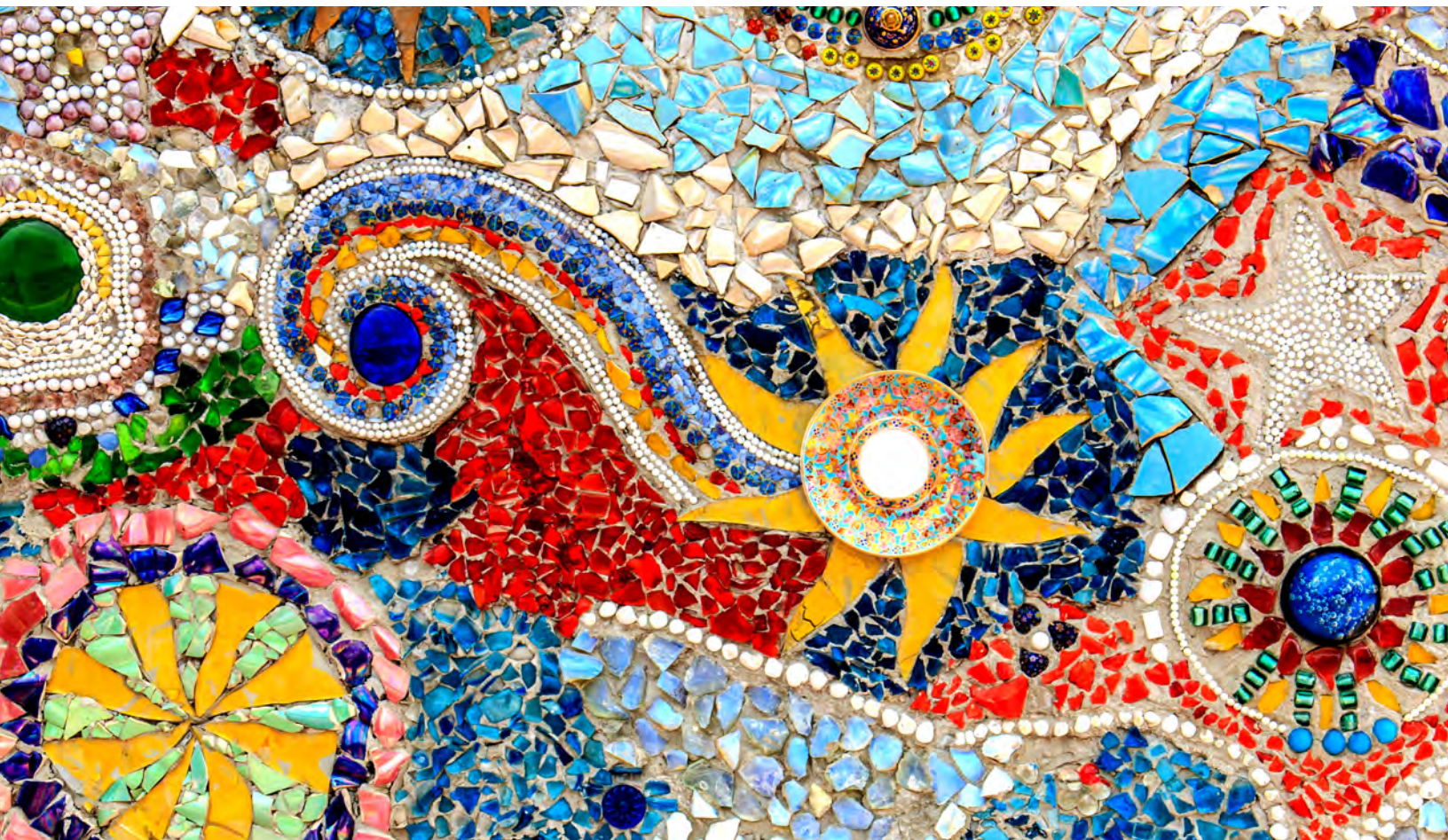# BUILDING THE FIELD OF ETHICAL, AUTHENTIC, & YOUTH-LED ADVOCACY:

KEY COMPONENTS OF A YOUTH ADVOCACY PROGRAM

AUTHORED BY

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BUILDING THE FIELD OF ETHICAL, AUTHENTIC, & YOUTH-LED ADVOCACY:

KEY COMPONENTS OF A THRIVING YOUTH ADVOCACY PROGRAM

Juvenile Law Center

Fighting for the rights and well-being of youth

Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the foster care and justice systems.

Founded in 1975, Juvenile Law Center is the first nonprofit, public interest law firm for children in the country. We fight for youth through litigation, appellate advocacy and submission of amicus (friend-of-the-court) briefs, policy reform, public education, training, consulting, and strategic communications. Widely published and internationally recognized as leaders in the field, Juvenile Law Center has substantially shaped the development of law and policy on behalf of youth. We strive to ensure that laws, policies, and practices affecting youth advance racial and economic equity and are rooted in research, consistent with children's unique developmental characteristics, and reflective of international human rights values. For more information about Juvenile Law Center's work, visit www.jlc.org.

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WHY YOUTH-LED ADVOCACY: AN INTRODUCTION

AN OVERVIEW OF THE YOUTH ADVOCACY PROGRAM AT JUVENILE LAW CENTER

Since 2008, Juvenile Law Center has been promoting youth voice and expertise through its Youth Advocacy Program which includes Juveniles for Justice (J4J)*, Youth Fostering Change (YFC), and the Youth Speakers Bureau. Each program provides youth with system involvement, ages 15-22, the opportunity to develop, propose, and advocate for effective solutions to longstanding systemic problems. Through the programs, youth advocates (our youth program members) develop leadership skills, political knowledge, communication and storytelling skills, and a sense of community. By choosing to share their personal experiences to develop and advance reforms, youth advocates help influence Juvenile Law Center's priorities by working to affect policy change through advocacy, media outreach, and public education.

Youth advocates in both programs meet weekly at Juvenile Law Center from October to the end of May. During this time, they learn valuable skills about how and when to share their experiences for systemic change: how to speak publicly in front of key stakeholders, how to develop a campaign based on an issue they select themselves, and how to work with partners to ensure long-lasting change. Youth advocates are hired employees of Juvenile Law Center which means they are paid for all meetings, check-ins, independent work, presentation preparation, and speaking engagements. They are always compensated for their time and expertise, including travel and other related expenses.

Youth advocates in YFC and J4J are eligible to participate in the Youth Speakers Bureau (YSB) at any point during their time as a youth advocate or following their program involvement. The YSB is designed to give youth advocates the skills to use their experience to develop and present thoughtful recommendations to large audiences. Program staff work with the youth advocates in the YSB individually to draft their presentations so they have control over their story and what they are willing to share. Program staff also have youth advocates prepare together and practice their presentations, so they are as comfortable as possible speaking in front of key stakeholders and partners.

Teens and young adults are recruited to apply for the program from partnering organizations in Philadelphia. These individuals are interviewed by Youth Advocacy Program staff, interns, and current youth advocates. All who apply are given the chance to interview and all applications are saved for the following year in case the program is a better fit next year.

*Please note that Youth Advocacy Program staff and members are taking time this year to consider changing the name of the Juveniles for Justice group. Program staff and members understand the negative implications of calling a group of children with experience in the justice system "juveniles" and hope to collectively identify a name that better suits the work and the young advocates while working to reduce harm. Please see: https://www.themarshallproject.org/2021/04/12/the-language-project

The Youth Advocacy Program begins the program year by developing a curriculum that must include identifying an issue to build a campaign around, building a campaign strategy, engaging in team building activities to build skills in the group, conducting research and discussions about institutions and systems, and learning how to strategically share personal stories. Many workshops in this curriculum are used every year to ensure there is time to develop group dynamics, teach members about the foster care and justice systems, share personal experiences, and learn from external partners and staff. Although many activities are regularly used each year, workshops are developed to reflect the issues the youth advocates choose and the campaigns they create. There is a fluidity to the Youth Advocacy Program curriculum that allows for program staff and interns and program fellows to develop new activities, youth advocates to recommend facilitation techniques, and program managers to prioritize the needs of the groups instead of following a rigid timeline.

The Youth Advocacy Team is staffed by two skilled policy-focused social workers, an associate with extensive background in working with youth and communities, a program fellow who has been through the program themselves, and two graduate interns working to complete their degrees in social work. This team provides vital support for the group members since many of them are currently system-involved or are facing challenges because of their system involvement. Support is provided through regular check-ins, referrals, emotional support, planning, and emergency resources including flexible funding available to the social workers to address crises or basic needs.

Over a decade's-worth of campaigns from Juveniles for Justice and Youth Fostering Change continue to be integrated into the on-going work and advocacy of Juvenile Law Center's legal teams. The projects completed by youth advocates influence the direction of the organization's work, along with the work of other partners in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and nationwide.

Understanding that each youth advocate comes with their own lived experiences also means understanding the systems of oppressions they have lived through and continue to confront. Often, because of their experience in the foster care system, children and teens can carry with them distrust of systems, housing instability, unaddressed mental wellness needs, and many other emotional and social emotional challenges. Similarly, because of their experience in the justice system, children and teens can carry distrust of systems and authority, unaddressed mental wellness needs, and many other intersecting challenges with other systems like school, housing, and foster care. In every aspect of the Youth Advocacy Program, staff constantly work to design spaces where youth can feel safer to share, are validated, and can identify pathways to power and opportunities to advocate for change for them and their peers. Staff work toward an anti-racist approach to this work that is influenced by thoughtful feedback, direction, and leadership from the youth advocates and the staff of the program. The team works to engage in frequent discussions of race and the intersectionality of race in the justice and foster care systems in all our youth-led campaigns, partnerships, and interpersonal relationships in the program.

THE POWER OF YOUTH VOICE

Youth expertise is essential to creating knowledgeable, progressive reform policies. The Youth Advocacy Program team, including the youth advocates themselves, believe youth with experience in the juvenile justice and foster care systems should be at the decision-making table when policies and legislation that have an impact on their lives and their communities. Youth-driven programming that incorporates youth experience and expertise in systemic reform at the local, state, and national levels results in targeted policies that effectively respond to the needs of youth.

The following components have all been crafted as a result of the on-going feedback and direction from youth advocates. These components were developed by social workers with extensive experience managing the Juvenile Law Center Youth Advocacy Program. Program management seeks out direction from members and alumni on every project, every workshop, and every speaking opportunity, and this information forms the basis of these components. Our youth advocates are skilled in providing critical feedback and leadership as part of their reform work. They also provide critical feedback on the development and facilitation of the Youth Advocacy Program which continues to improve based on their evaluations each year.

Since 2008, Juvenile Law Center's Youth Advocacy Program has evolved into a national model for deliberate, inclusive curriculum, community engagement, and advocacy because of the consistent feedback and expertise of the teens and young adults it serves. Every year the program changes to better address the needs of the youth advocates both inside and outside of the program, and to ensure their advocacy work is driven by their lived experience and perspectives. One of the most important changes the program has made in alignment with the goals of Juvenile Law Center is to explicitly and thoughtfully center race in both the programming supports for the youth advocates and the campaigns the youth advocates develop. Many of these changes have been driven by feedback from members of Youth Fostering Change and Juveniles for Justice.

Every component in this guide is influenced by years of collaboration with young people in Philadelphia. The Youth Advocacy Program at Juvenile Law Center has been so successful in engaging young people and making systemic changes in the foster care and juvenile justice systems because of our youth-centered approach and our willingness to adapt to meet our young members where they are when they enter and continue through the program. These components have been defined by policies that best support the fluid and sometimes unstable realities our youth advocates are experiencing AND by humbly asking for direction from our youth advocates when the program does not seem to be working for them and then involving them in the change process.

THE YOUTH ADVOCATE REFLECTION PROCESS

To gain feedback from current and past youth advocates about these key components, focus groups were held for youth advocates and conducted by unbiased graduate interns. Open-ended questions about the key components were used to bring forward as much critical feedback as possible and truly capture youth voice in this publication. For all Youth Advocate Reflections sections in the publication, youth advocates from Juveniles for Justice and Youth Fostering Change were given the synopsis of each component, were asked a series of questions, and were prompted to think of an example of how that component played out in the program. These questions were asked in focus-group settings. Their feedback was compiled by interns in a collective voice.

In addition to the small focus groups with current members of Youth Fostering Change and Juveniles for Justice, the document was reviewed in its entirety by the Youth Advocacy Program Alumni Fellow. This fellowship is designed specifically for individuals who completed their three years in the program, remained an active alumnus in the Youth Speakers Bureau, and expressed an interest in participating in the development and facilitation of the Youth Advocacy Programs. Crucial feedback was given and implemented about the type of emergency support youth advocates are given, additional details about the issue selection process, and how specifically racial biases and issues of equity have been fleshed out over the past few years.

KEY COMPONENTS

1 SUPPORT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES BASED ON ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT, TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICE, AND EQUITABLE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

When establishing a youth-led advocacy program, the learned and lived experiences of its young members need to be considered and made a part of the development of the program. In Juvenile Law Center's Youth Advocacy Program, members have been or are currently involved in the foster care and/or juvenile justice system. These members are expected to address barriers and sometimes traumas they still face every day. Some of these barriers or traumas typically are abuse, poor treatment, unstable placements, feeling abandoned and alone, and lack of supportive adults in their lives. Additionally, the members of this program are in the prime of their adolescent development. The behavior they often exhibit, which can involve risk-taking or defiance, is reflective of the stage of their brain development. Curriculum development must include how to equitably work with the members using a trauma-informed approach.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Working with "youth" or "adolescents" requires a plan for individualized support that is informed by the unique experiences that each young person brings to the group. When developing a youth-led program based on the experiences of the members, having a keen understanding of child serving systems; adolescent development; trauma-informed approaches; and race, equity and inclusion policies will determine both the success of the program, the emotional impact on the program members, and the number of members retained in the program over time. We aim to begin the year with approximately 30 youth advocates, at least 15 in each. We typically experience some loss of participants early in the program year despite full description of the program at the outset. We then have very high retention for the program and for return to the program for years two and three.

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

First and foremost, the brains of teens and young adults are still developing. Research has proven that the developmental stage of adolescence continues to at least age 25. Because of this, we know young program members are inclined to learn through experience and that this can include risky behavior. We also know that, like most young people, youth advocates typically need regular reminders for meetings and may need directions re-explained or re-worded. These are products of adolescence, not bad behavior! The idea that a young person can be given a set of instructions to follow and are then expected to follow those instructions precisely is not practical or effective. Program staff need to create developmentally appropriate activities and practices to best engage with teens and young adults. These practices include regular outreach and reminders, a nonpunitive approach to negative behavior, taking the time to learn why they are acting a particular way, teaching time management skills, and developing creative activities that engage a variety of skillsets (reading, writing in many forms, talking in different groupings and in a variety of modes including poetry and spoken word, drawing, viewing, singing). Using knowledge of adolescent development will help professionals and program managers in two ways: 1. they will develop instructions, activities, and modes of communication that are individualized; and 2. they will be able to share effective strategies with other system professionals who might not understand the intricacies of adolescent development or how those intricacies play out when working with young advocates.

A program member comes to us and says that their probation officer is requiring that they attend weekly sessions on drug and alcohol treatment and recovery, and if they don't comply, they will be sent to an out-of-home placement. We know that this youth has a lot on their plate at home and in school and needs visual learning techniques to understand your policy campaigns during your weekly workshops. We want this youth to be successful with this drug and alcohol program, so we reach out to the probation officer and encourage them to first meet their client where they are and remind the probation officer that this youth is still a child and is not fully able to juggle so many requirements at the same time. We suggest that they meet with the youth to discuss how they plan to make the weekly program, ask if they might need weekly reminders to ensure they attend the program, and ask if they have suggestions to attend an alternative program.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Juvenile Law Center's Youth Advocacy Program is designed for youth with experience in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. According to the Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, approximately 90% of children with experience in foster care have been exposed to four or more different types of trauma [1]. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative identifies simultaneous or continuous occurrences of maltreatment as 'complex trauma'.[2] Therefore, we can reasonably conclude that many of the young people in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems are experiencing ongoing complex trauma. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative further explains that mere involvement in the foster care system is traumatic.[2] As a result, young program members who are system involved may share parts of their stories that are traumatic. Because of this, professionals running youth-led programs must be well-versed in trauma-informed practices to protect their program members from the harm of oversharing and re-traumatization. A young person who has never talked about personal experiences or traumas before might think that sharing this information to inform change is worth the personal risk. However, if professionals do not properly prepare the young person with tools for identifying parts of their story and skillsets to cope with their possible re-traumatization, the young advocate could be faced to deal with a host of painful, unresolved memories without adequate therapeutic support.

Before developing a curriculum that is trauma-informed, professionals should understand the complex traumas that young people, especially young people with systems experience, are facing. Complex trauma or trauma of any kind will have an enormous impact on how program members are able to contribute to the program and will determine how much support each individual needs. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) outlines four key assumptions for practitioners to use when working on a trauma-informed approach.[3] The first assumption, "realization," is most important when developing a trauma-informed approach.[3] Practitioners must realize that a person's behavior is dependent on the coping strategies they had to develop from events in the past or are forming based on their current experience.

A member of the program was tasked with presenting to an audience of key stakeholders about the importance of transitional support in the child welfare system. This task required the young person to reflect on the lack of support in their own lives through major life transitions and brought up feelings of neglect or abandonment about having to leave homes that felt secure. The youth was currently grappling with whether they would be allowed to stay in extended foster care or face another transition. We needed the structure in place to build a space for the young person to advocate for change that limits re-traumatization and provides support. If this was not provided, the young person could experience emotional distress, stop responding to outreach and communication, and give up the opportunity to be part of the program. Some ways we built a space for this young person are helping them identify boundaries for what they are willing to talk about and what they do not want to talk about, reminding the young person that they can ask for help from support staff when questions seem difficult to answer and making sure the young presenter has written notes to help them guide what they want to say.

CENTERING RACE, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Understanding the impact of racism and other factors on communities is imperative to understanding complex trauma experienced by communities and individuals. The key assumption of "realization" along with SAMHSA's second key assumption, "recognition," urges professionals to see other institutional and environmental factors that may have an impact on the young person.[3] An overwhelming number of young people involved in the child welfare and justice systems identify as Black and Latinx. In addition, Black and Latinx youth are often less likely to gain permanency than their white peers. Black and Latinx youth also carry the weight (and pain) of institutional racism and implicit biases while trying to navigate systems that inherently target them for the color of their skin. Acknowledging this when working directly with youth is important as it allows youth to put the challenges they are facing into perspective and recognize that these challenges are often tied to larger systemic issues.

A member of our program was trying to understand why they were struggling to access appropriate resources, like health insurance. They thought it was their fault that they could not access this benefit. In reality, to access this benefit, they needed consistent access to a phone and computer, possession of several vital documents, an understanding of complex terminology, and time to be on the computer or phone for several hours at a time. We worked with the youth advocate to understand how institutional racism and pervasive poverty mean that individuals who might need universal healthcare most encounter the most difficulties accessing it.

Program staff need to cast a large safety net for their members. This safety net may make program participants more likely to open-up about past traumas to the group, but also to feel like the program staff understands the daily struggles they encounter and that they are addressing those struggles in the work. Program participants should feel like they have the support and trust they need to continue coming to the program and feel safe enough to share their experiences of the countless social, racial, environmental, and often traumatic barriers they face daily.

OUR APPROACH TO SUPPORT AND RETENTION

Across the organization, Juvenile Law Center uses developmental science and trauma-informed research to inform all our work. The office is explicit and persistent in working toward using a race equity lens for all work. Every piece of policy reform, intervention model, communication, or publication is developed with an understanding and appreciation for the unique experiences, identities, and developmental status of youth. When applying theories of adolescent development and trauma-informed practice to the Youth Advocacy Program, each youth advocate is met where they are when they start the program. Staff are responsive to feedback from the youth advocates and actively make changes that work for the youth advocates. Youth Advocacy Program Managers provide direct support to youth in the program using an adolescent development and trauma informed framework.

BUILDING A CURICULUM

The youth advocates' experience and perspectives are at the center of developing the curricula each year for the Youth Advocacy Program. Program managers consistently incorporate language to ensure youth advocates know they never have to share personal information that they do not want to share. Even in the Youth Speakers Bureau, youth advocates are reminded that they have complete autonomy over what they share about their experiences. Their expertise, not their personal traumas, drive the curriculum and their advocacy. Their personal experiences are but one component of their expertise and offer us facts and understanding of the impact of systems on youth and young adults. The facilitation techniques in the curriculum are also developed to meet the individual learning style of each youth advocate and how they learn. Staff always ask youth advocates if they are visual or auditory learners, if they like to work in groups or by themselves, and if they like to draw instead of write and adjust learning activities to meet the needs of the group. If something big happens in the news or in their neighborhood, the program shifts to include group discussions and reflections. If the group is tired of writing, activities may shift to large group discussions, interactive activities, or artistic expressions of the project.

With the feedback and guidance provided by the youth advocates, Youth Advocacy Program managers have incorporated explicit discussions of race and bias into the curriculum. All members of the Youth Advocacy Team are directed to explicitly address race in discussing the root causes of systemic issues during facilitation. Part of this discussion includes letting the youth advocates know they can and should talk about race as it pertains to other barriers they face. Doing this creates an atmosphere of understanding that the trauma they may experience is complex and may go beyond their system experience.

PROVIDING ROBUST AND CONSISTENT SUPPORT

Since the beginning of the Youth Advocacy Program, individualized supports have grown exponentially. Program Managers realize that young people could not offer their expertise and be present in the workshops while they are in crisis outside of the workshops.

Youth advocates in the Youth Fostering Change program often experience instability and stress in their lives. Examples of instability include homelessness, discharge from care with little to no support, changes in foster homes, food insecurity, and conflicts with foster families or biological family. They frequently identify a severe lack of adequate mental health support and services. Similarly, youth advocates in Juveniles for Justice often struggle with instability during the program, including trying to complete their education, experiencing fear of reincarceration, and managing a myriad of collateral consequences of having a juvenile or adult record. In addition, all youth advocates are also coping with the natural emotional and often confusing transition into adulthood, many without adult support. Most of the youth advocates are left to reconcile unaddressed trauma brought on by their time in these systems.

To help provide as much support as possible to the youth advocates, Youth Advocacy Program managers conduct initial check-ins or interviews when new youth advocates start the program to learn about their experiences, current lives, unmet needs, learning style, and any possible triggers. Throughout the year, regular check-ins are conducted to address individual needs, crises, planning in their cases, education planning, and court advocacy. The frequency of the check-ins depends on the individual interest and need of each participant. Some participants will request check-ins once or twice a week regularly, some participants request check-ins less frequently or when they need additional support, while others may request a check-in once every other month. Check-ins can be as frequent as a youth wants or needs. Practically speaking, successful check-ins depend on identifying the best modes of communication. Should communication be via text, email, Instagram, Facebook, iMessage, a best friend's phone? Should communications be in the morning, evening, on Tuesdays only? Identifying the best mode of communication is an example of using an adolescent development approach to ensure young people stay connected and remain in the program.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STABLE SUPPORT SYSTEMS

For many young people lacking significant social and family support, the program becomes a vital support system. Youth advocates are given the opportunity to stay in the program for three years. (The program was extended to four years during 2020 Covid-19 pandemic to allow youth to stay in the program and all youth advocates completing the third year chose to stay on that additional year.) There is a dramatic change and growth in each youth advocate when they are able to stay in the program for all three years: they continue to develop their comprehensive understanding of systems; and can confidently speak about their experiences and present recommendations for change. Youth advocates were instrumental in the decision to extend the program to three years instead of two. Many expressed that they still appreciated the learning and support from the program and desired more time to grow and develop skills. Youth retention has increased since this change was made because they develop relationships within the organization and with their peers and begin seeing the program as a consistent source of support.

In 2017, the Youth Advocacy Program managers developed a system to connect Juvenile Law Center staff with a youth advocate to expand the net of support provided to youth. The goal of the Buddy Program was to respond to staff and youth requests to have more opportunities to directly engage outside of workshops and for youth to know more about staff and Juvenile Law Center's work areas. In the Buddy Program, staff and youth advocates are matched together as "buddies." The staff buddy is required to meet with the youth advocate buddy at least once a month to provide another support and connection in the organization. The buddy pairs discuss what they expect out of the relationship. The Youth Advocacy Program managers developed protocols and guidance for staff and youth advocates to support these relationships. The additional support of a buddy is a positive. Young people have identified feeling more welcomed and included within the office as a result of the Buddy Program.

Youth advocates are encouraged to stay involved in the program as alumni, often formally through the Youth Speakers' Bureau, when they complete three years in the program. Alumni can continue receiving support through individual check-ins and speaking opportunities. Each member and the relationships that are formed over time with youth advocates in the programs are valued. Connections with alumni through their desired mode of communication are maintained. All alumni are encouraged to come visit the weekly workshops, participate in facilitation, and visit the office to catch up with Youth Advocacy Program staff and other Juvenile Law Center staff. The benefit for the field, staff, and current youth advocates when alumni can remain actively engaged with the program and remain a part of the policy reforms is evident. Alumni have the skills, after completing the three years in the program, to work alongside Juvenile Law Center staff to ensure lived experience and recommendations are thoroughly incorporated into the policy reform. Like the current members of the program, alumni are compensated for all their time. The rate of compensation increases during years one, two and three of the program and is higher for alumni.

REFLECTIONS FROM YOUTH ADVOCATES

Youth advocates cited the development of the Youth Emergency Fund as a program element that supported retention. In 2018, Juvenile Law Center directed new funds to the Youth Advocacy Program to support immediate or emergency needs of the youth advocates. The fund supports a variety of specific needs for youth advocates, ranging from purchasing vital documents (i.e. birth certificates, social security cards and state identification cards), to purchasing work uniforms so a young person can start a new job, to emergency housing assistance.

One youth advocate was able to use the funding to help them establish stable housing. The youth advocate described that he felt comfortable coming to us to share his housing crisis and needs and was relieved to access assistance quickly and without barriers, or, in his words "begging." He said that we handled the situation perfectly and went above and beyond. He felt listened to and validated.

2 SUFFICIENT STAFFING BY HIGHLY TRAINED INDIVIDUALS WITH A SOCIAL WORK OR HUMAN SERVICES BACKGROUND

Sufficient staffing by human service professionals with adequate and relevant training is needed to run a supportive youth-led advocacy program. Having sufficient staffing is vital to building a strong program that can support young people and do effective advocacy work. Staff must also have relevant training to do their jobs effectively. This training gives professionals the skills to build and implement a youth-driven advocacy program, to address the unique needs of the young leaders and to lead the rest of the organization's staff in working with the youth advocates.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Youth-led programming should have designated staff to support the on-going development of the programs and the needs of the members. The staffs' primary focus should be running and growing the programs in a manner that supports youth. Staff should have a background in youth development, trauma informed practice, a strong understanding of social service systems, and guiding ethical principles. The ideal staff are professionals with degrees and expertise in the field of human services, child and family studies, and more specifically social work. Human service professionals, or more specifically social workers, are equipped with the skills to work with young people who need additional support and resources in times of crisis.

ADAPTING EVIDENCE-BASED ETHICAL CODES

The human services profession was developed to address human needs and social problems in communities. These professionals are required to follow the Ethical Standards of Human Services Professionals.[4] According to the National Association for Social Work (NASW) Delegate Assembly, the NASW Code of Ethics offers values, principals, and standards that guide social workers in their practice.[5] These ethical principles are based on values of service, social justice, dignity, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.[4,5] These values are essential when working with young people to develop campaigns for change while they are still experiencing the lasting, often traumatic impact of their systems involvement. Professionals need to have the interpersonal skills, resource background, and ethical obligation to help young program members who are experiencing an array of stresses and crises, such as homelessness, mental health challenges, reenrolling in school, pending juvenile charges, and environmental stressors.

In Dr. Bonnie Young Laing's research titled "African American Models of Community Organization: Toward a Culturally Competent Theory," she concludes that social workers must additionally understand the impact of ongoing oppression, the daily social reality, and the impact of community connectedness on Black members of the program.[6] Therefore, to claim advocacy work and engagement is ethical, social workers also must understand the intersectionality of each young person's experience. Each program member brings a host of social problems to the table when developing recommendations for change, and how they will develop those solutions through their own lens of personal experiences. To provide the utmost support, leadership, and guidance for the young members of the group, social work professionals need to consistently strive to understand the intersectionality of system involvement, trauma, race, and poverty and then have that understanding inform their practice. It is also imperative for social workers and organizations to be aware of and understand the experiences and identities that social workers bring to the work. This is important because systems of oppression influence everyone, especially on staff of color and social workers who may come from, and or be a part of the communities and have similar lived experiences to the youth they are working with.

USING A MACRO APPROACH TO SOLUTIONS

Human services professionals are also equipped with a strong background in understanding the intricacies of policy reform. Human services professionals are already required to advocate against local, state, and federal laws that cause harm to individuals, groups, or communities according to the National Organization of Human Services.[4] Those running youth-led programming need the skills to address individual needs and support, and the background to understand state and federal law, communicate with key stakeholders, develop and facilitate trainings and workshops, strategize with partners about advocacy projects, and draft portions of legislation that accurately and authentically incorporate youth voice. Social workers or human service professionals have an expansive understanding of social problems and on-going systemic issues that are at the core of these social problems. When working with young leaders, especially Black, Latinx, and Indigenous persons and other persons of color, program management will need to design spaces where youth can are encouraged to share how causes of the social problems and issues are rooted in inequity and discrimination.

One project addressed the issue of better supports in schools for young people in the foster care system. Youth leaders and program management had a difficult time identifying true solutions without identifying the barriers that low resourced inner-city schools face. Additionally, as we dug further into lower resourced schools, we needed to acknowledge the impact of racial segregation, zoning, and gentrification on school supports and resources.

RECOGNIZING PERSONAL BIASES

Individuals with human service and social work training have the necessary education and background to provide individualized support and policy advocacy while also being aware of personal biases. Staff must be aware of conscious and unconscious bias and must work to eliminate bias in practice. This is an ethical standard of human services professionals according to the National Organization for Human Services and an ethical principal under the National Association for Social Work.[4,5] Social workers are trained to address social problems and pursue avenues for social change. Any activities to address these social problems must also "promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity."

OUR APPROACH TO SUFFICIENT STAFFING

Youth Advocacy Program managers at Juvenile Law Center have specializations in macro-level policy reform and social work. Having staff with a background in policy advocacy and reform is essential to develop the youth advocates' campaigns. Though campaigns are youth-derived and youth-driven, the framework of the campaigns is based on the knowledge and diligence of these program managers to advance and elevate the project. Staff are well trained in adolescent development and trauma-informed practice as required by social work theory and practicum. Juvenile Law Center provides support for additional training, continuing education, and travel for conferences to ensure that staff are up to date on the best practices for working with youth advocates. The training that staff receive includes facilitation, leadership, and curriculum development specifically around building policy campaigns.

⬤ BUILDING A CAMPAIGN

Staff capacity and training is critical for the success of the annual reform campaigns. Through the development of the campaigns and projects, the program managers use their background in policy reform to reach out to the appropriate stakeholders, address the societal root causes of the issues the youth advocates identify and encourage discussions of race and how biases have an impact on the solutions to the issues. Much of the ongoing work of the program managers consists of reaching out to the appropriate partners, engaging with their work, and collaborating on joint projects to advance the policy work of the youth advocates. Additionally, to design the policy campaigns, program managers meet with Juvenile Law Center's legal staff regularly to stay current on new legislation, policies, resources, and partnerships, and meet with key stakeholders to collaborate on projects, gain support and disseminate information. All these steps and core program components are crucial to elevating the voices of youth who are most impacted by the juvenile justice and foster care systems.

⬤ PROVIDING INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT

The need for appropriate and sufficient staffing for any youth program is vital to its success and supporting its youth members. Program managers use weekly supervision to teach and provide other Youth Advocacy Program staff with the appropriate tools to best support youth advocates. Staff's social work and human service backgrounds equip them to provide youth with an array of supports. Supports include: resource referral, case planning, de-escalation, and court advocacy. Although the Youth Advocacy Program does not provide therapeutic counseling or case management, the team has the background and skill set to ask youth advocates the right questions (questions that are not triggering or invasive) to identify what supports they might need and connect and refer them to the appropriate resources. These resources are identified through regular check-ins with all youth advocates. Youth advocates can schedule check-ins with any Youth Advocacy Program staff members to receive support; they can pick who they feel most comfortable with and can rely on the availability of at least one staff member if they need emergency support. Social workers (and human service professionals) are professionally obligated to identify services and supports for their clients. Therefore, Youth Advocacy Program managers, who are social workers, identify plans, provide advocacy, and refer to appropriate resources for all youth advocates who participate in Youth Fostering Change and Juveniles for Justice and alumni. As a part of their core responsibilities, all program staff are tasked with helping youth advocates or finding internal or external resources to provide specialized support. No youth issue is ignored simply because the resource is not easily accessible.

Staff need the capacity, training and resources to respond flexibly to youth needs. During the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, our organization staff and program staff sought to engage youth advocates virtually to ensure the continuation of the policy campaigns and their engagement in the program. To do this, we provided technological support by purchasing Chromebooks for those who needed them, sent groceries to those who were unable to safely go to the grocery store, signed all members up for virtual mental wellness support, and continued paying youth advocates for the weekly workshops even if they were unable to attend because of technological difficulties.

3 BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR THE PROGRAM: AN OFFICE-WIDE COMMITMENT

To develop an authentic and ethical youth-led program, the entire organization must be dedicated to developing sufficient capacity to run the program. The organization supporting the program must be aware of the everyday demands of running a youth-led program and be willing to provide necessary supervisory and financial support. The organization must also ensure adequate compensation for the youth advocates for all their program-related activities and provide support for day-to-day necessities and possible emergencies of the youth advocates.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Maintaining balance in an organization, specifically a nonprofit, means identifying the needs of the staff, the strategies to address the needs, and then allocating (often scarce) resources to support those needs.[7]

BEGINNING WITH A MISSION AND VISION

Commitment to youth-led programming begins with the mission and vision of an organization. Leadership and other organizational staff must value and be dedicated to incorporating youth voice and expertise. According to the Urban Institute's "Building Capacity in Nonprofit Organizations" the mission and vision is the starting point for determining capacity and needs in an organization.[7] This means the intention to include and incorporate youth voice and expertise must be rooted throughout the whole organization. If the goal is to create a program that continues to grow with the mission and direction of the organization, dedicated staff need to be hired specifically for the program and young members need to be regarded as vital staff members, all fully resourced to do their critical work.

PROVIDING APPROPRIATE STAFFING

One of the most important commitments that agencies can make to a youth-led program is to ensure that the program is appropriately staffed. Youth-led programs cannot be a side project for a few staff at the organization. There must be designated staff for the program to ensure consistency for the young leaders and partners of the program as discussed in Key Component #2. Managing the program effectively requires the full attention of the staff running the program and adequate supervision. Program capacity and how the organization chooses to staff the program is just as crucial to its success and function as the youth-led program and the young people's advocacy. At a minimum, the program needs dedicated management to develop and oversee the program and staff. Under each program model, management also needs program support staff to ensure that day-to-day tasks required to run programs are completed. The size of the support staff will vary depending on the number of youth participants. Support staff should grow as the program or organization grows. The organization should consider hiring staff who have lived experiences that personally connect them to the systems that the program is seeking to reform.

FULLY INTEGRATING YOUR PROGRAM

Having dedicated staff within the organization that support youth programing who are not part of the core youth advocacy staff is key to the success of the program. An agency must have organizational buy-in from all departments including administration and management. Organization staff must be invested in the youth-led program to provide adequate funding for programmatic and payroll needs, but also to collaborate with young leaders and appropriately, authentically, and ethically use youth voice to influence organizational efforts. Organization staff must fully acknowledge young people who are members of the program as integral office staff. According to the SAMHSA's Key Assumptions and Principals, the way an organization responds to the young person or the person experiencing the traumas that are informing the advocacy work has a significant impact on the experience of the person in the organization.[3] It is vital that "the organization is committed to providing a physically and psychologically safe environment that promotes trust, fairness and transparency."[3]

OUR APPROACH TO BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

When Juvenile Law Center first developed the Youth Advocacy Program (initially referred to as Youth Engagement Programs), it was staffed by interns and attorneys as a supplemental project to their legal work. Later, the programs were staffed by an attorney for supervision, a one-year Philadelphia Fellow, and a part-time graduate level intern. The groups were small, capping at roughly six people in each group, the alumni network was also quite small with less than 20 members. There was not enough capacity to sustain the reach of the advocacy work past the program year or provide individualized support. In 2013, Juvenile Law Center hired a full-time program associate with a master's degree in social work to manage the primary development and facilitation of the programs with continued support of a staff attorney and a graduate level social work intern. The groups consisted of roughly 8-10 members in each program and an alumni network of roughly 30 members.

Frequent changes in the facilitation and management of the program prevented youth advocates from creating a sense of community or connectedness to the program and organization and therefore did not encourage long-standing participation. The shift to consistent facilitation and management through full-time employees for the program allowed for sustainable growth of the policy campaigns, increased consistency, and support for the youth advocates in the program, less time spent training and acclimating new staff to the program, on-going strengthening of partner relationships, and increased knowledge of systems and the organization's overall values. More importantly, the program began to use evaluative measures to allow youth advocates a say in how the program is shaped for the following year.

GROWING WITH GROWTH

Over time, as capacity grew, larger cohorts of youth advocates were maintained and the alumni network and overall group size grew. The demand for dissemination of the policy campaigns, youth speakers around the city, state, and country also grew. In 2015, Youth Advocacy Program staff proposed the need for expansion and increased staffing to hire another graduate level social worker to co-manage the programs. The following year the programs were staffed by two Youth Advocacy Program Managers with master's degrees in social work policy, and a part-time graduate level social work intern. The added staff and expertise expanded the reach of the program across the country with more partners and stakeholders, helped identify a larger need for individualized resources and supports, and encouraged the integration of the program with project teams in the organization. Predictably, as the programs grew in staff, the work continued to expand.

In 2018, funding was provided to hire an alum of the program to work with Youth Advocacy Program staff, increasing the staffing to three individuals (two managers and one alumni fellow) and two interns. The program management consistently received feedback from the youth advocates encouraging the organization to hire someone who has been through the program to help improve the program and run the weekly advocacy workshops. This addition has had profound impact because of the lived experience and expertise that the youth advocacy alum has with the program. In 2020, an additional full-time staff person was added to work across the program and provide added capacity to support alumni and continue to advocate past projects.

Today, the numbers are capped at fifteen members for each group and the alumni network has roughly 100 members. The Youth Speakers Bureau includes roughly twenty active alumni in addition to the youth participants currently in the program. These youth have reached audiences across the country. The size of the audiences grows each year which means the messages, stories, and recommendations of the youth advocates are reaching more people. For example, during the 2019-2020 program year, the youth advocates spoke at over 100 different events to a combined audience of over 4300 people.

◗ MAKING AN INVESTMENT IN LIVED-EXPERTISE

The program needs and everyday demands of running a youth-led program are increasingly apparent. As the organization's awareness has increased along with the recognition that this work is vital to sustainable system change, necessary support for youth advocates to participate in the program has increased. The organizational support, program management advocacy, and board support has allowed Juvenile Law Center's Youth Advocacy Program to grow into a respected national model that truly values the expertise of its youth advocates. One core way Juvenile Law Center values the work of youth advocates is through appropriate compensation (a living wage set at $15/hr minimum for first year youth advocates) for any work by the youth advocates. This philosophy reflects the respect that the organization has for the youth advocates' time, lived experience, and expertise. While this compensation does serve as an incentive for the youth, it is about recognizing the value of a young person's time and being serious about placing youth voice at the center of the professionals' advocacy work. This includes seeking compensation from outside organizations when the youth advocates are asked to present to them and when that is not possible, Juvenile Law Center provides compensation.

Another more recent addition to support the youth advocates is the Youth Emergency Fund. Though this fund was advocated for by Youth Advocacy staff, organization management and the board recognized the importance of providing instant support for the youth members when they needed it in order to have them successfully participate in the program. A pool of funds, which was significantly increased during the COVID crisis, is available to the youth advocacy staff to distribute to youth advocates when needs arise. In 2020, Juvenile Law Center added Modern Health, a mental/behavioral health online, coaching and remote therapy resource for all staff, including youth advocates and their dependents.

REFLECTIONS FROM YOUTH ADVOCATES

When youth advocates were asked about how the program was staffed, the group discussed staff expertise and being empowered to share different points of view on how to tackle a problem. They also discussed the importance of having multiple staff present during sessions to help support both the group and the individual. Youth advocates talked about a specific session that was held when there was a large disruption during the workshop. Having multiple staff allowed the session to continue for the rest of the group while one of t us was able to take the young person involved in the disruption to the side to discuss what was going on and how to help.

Youth advocates also discussed the importance of having more than one staff person available for check-ins and meetings with them when they need additional support. They shared that they never have to wait for staff to be available if there is a problem.

4 YOUTH EMPOWERMENT TO ADVOCATE IN THEIR OWN LIVES AND CASES

When youth are asked to engage in advocacy work based on their own experiences, those managing the program need to understand that there is a real possibility of re-traumatization. Staff must be equipped with the skills to provide young people with the support and resources to process these traumas and help them begin to advocate in their own lives and cases.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

An emphasis on the empowerment of each youth advocate is foundational to an authentic youth-led advocacy program. Learning the practice of empowerment goes beyond participation in systemic reform and may lead to a larger sense of control and power to change one's own life.[8]

ENGAGING IN SYSTEMIC AND PERSONAL ADVOCACY

Youth involvement in system change and policy campaigns is based on the notion that those closest to the problem have the clearest solution. Someone who is living through the problem has a better sense of the unique difficulties one faces when trying to find a solution. They know how it feels to be faced with that issue, they know how other people perceive them while trying to find help, they know how much planning and commitment it takes to implement the solution, and they know how easy it is to fail while trying their best to address the problem.

Sometimes those closest to the problem in advocacy groups are still experiencing the challenges and barriers associated with that problem. In this case, young people are being asked to advocate for long-term systemic changes while still working to hurdle barriers caused by these systems. In fact, they may be working for change while knowing that they will never see the positive impact of their work in their own lives. For these reasons, personal advocacy, skill development, and individual support for every young person in the program is essential so they have the capacity to do systemic advocacy. Young people are better able to focus on the current campaign or project if they receive sufficient support with their own lives and challenges.

Being engaged in systemic advocacy empowers youth to take action in their own lives and learn that their voice matters and has impact. When members are educated on the strategies to make lasting change, they become aware that they can make a change in their own life or case. Research spanning the last three decades suggests that youth who participate in meaningful roles or programs and learn new skills in these types of programs will have a high sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy.[9] Empowerment of individuals leads to more positive outcomes for those individuals.

Understanding the value of individualized support is an essential practice for authentic, youth-led advocacy and programming. The Youth Art & Self-empowerment Project (YASP) in Philadelphia states this well; "Our organizing strategy is grounded in the belief that we, as an organization, must be able to support young people in their everyday struggles if we want them to lead us in their larger struggle for social and political change." (p. 3) [10] It might be quite difficult for young leaders to entirely focus on a campaign about changing policy in the foster care or juvenile justice system when they are still dealing with the effects of their own case. Therefore, much of what is taught in the program by those running it must not only address strategies for policy reform but also must be pertinent to the young person's own experiences. Teaching young people their rights, about the court process, and how to communicate with their attorney and social worker can be instrumental in advancing a campaign and can lead to better outcomes for those in the program.

MEETING YOUTH WHERE THEY ARE

Young people are drawn to advocacy programs for a variety of reasons. Programs need to meet each individual where they are when they start the program. Some join because they want to be advocates for others, others join because they need a job, or because their participation is strongly suggested by another supportive adult. In addition to the varied reasons for participation, young people will have a wide range of learning styles, education and comprehension. Group activities will need to be adjusted to allow all group members to participate fully in the activity. For example, an activity designed to learn about personal barriers youth face might include the option to write about those barriers, write a poem about those barriers, OR draw a picture capturing those barriers. As mentioned above, young members may be experiencing on-going crises associated with their systems involvement, systemic racism and discrimination, and trials and tribulations of emerging adulthood. Each young person is different and brings a host of experiences with them when they enter the program. It is the responsibility of the program management to develop a program that provides sufficient support and participation options to allow each youth to fully engage in policy advocacy. Additionally, clear privacy policies and values within the group setting developed by program staff and program participants can work to create a space for young advocates to share.

OUR APPROACH TO YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

CREATING A SPACE TO SHARE OR NOT SHARE

The Youth Advocacy Program begins the program year with team building activities to build skills in the group; research and discussions about institutions and systems; training on how to strategically share personal stories; activities to identify an issue to build a campaign around, and development of a plan to build a campaign strategy. Many youth advocates will be talking about difficult experiences in their lives for the very first time. Program management work extensively to teach youth advocates how and when to share their experiences (see Key Component #5 to learn more about strategic sharing). This tactic of making sure youth advocates feel comfortable to share their experiences serves also to build a relationship with the youth advocates so they feel comfortable sharing when other issues arise and when they are facing ongoing barriers.

Too often, youth advocates in Youth Fostering Change and Juveniles for Justice are tasked with managing very adult responsibilities in their lives: schooling, court schedules, food shopping, bills, health care, and mental well-being (sometimes all while raising children or caring for siblings). When youth advocates feel comfortable sharing what they are trying to manage in their personal lives with program staff, they can work together to plan and prioritize before the youth advocates end up in an emergency situation where they might need financial assistance, food for themselves or children, or even housing before becoming homeless. Youth advocates take those planning skills and use them to advocate for themselves in the future. Sometimes youth advocates do not feel comfortable sharing what is going on in their lives until there is an emergency. When youth advocates bring these issues to program staff, they are still using vital advocacy skills by knowing where to turn in a time of crisis. All of this is possible because of the relationships and trust the members of the program develop with program staff.

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALIZED ADVOCACY

Youth Advocacy Program managers support the development of the group members' advocacy skills so they can better support themselves in their own cases or their own independent living planning. Over time, feelings of self-efficacy increase, and youth begin to feel confident in their skills and build trust within the program knowing they will receive support in their own self-advocacy. In addition, because Youth Advocacy Program managers are social workers with a specific code of ethics and reporting, they cannot ignore the challenges youth advocates voice during the workshops. When youth identify a need or concern, it is either addressed directly during the workshop or staff may ask the youth if they are willing to set up a time to meet to work through the issue. This can involve providing advice, connecting to resources, or identifying contact information for other advocates on the youth's team. Program management may assess there is a need to do more specialized advocacy, like making phone calls to the young person's advocacy team, recommending referrals for services, answering questions about education forms, writing letters of support, going to court to support the young person, or simply giving them time to process a difficult or traumatic event. This support gives the members the tools to advocate for themselves in the future.

As more Juvenile Law Center staff develop relationships with the youth advocates through the Buddy Program (as mentioned in Key Component #2), they also provide letters of support for the youth advocates in their court proceedings, agree to be references for job or school applications, and work to provide them with essential life-skills planning and mentorship. Having additional wrap-around support for youth advocates in the program often empowers them to be more active in their own cases or their personal advocacy knowing that there are so many people available to help them along the way.

REFLECTIONS FROM YOUTH ADVOCATES

When asked about program support for the youth advocates in their own cases, the group talked about the different moments in which staff helped them with various issues in their personal lives. One young person talked about how we were able to guide and assist him in a case involving his siblings. We gave him an idea for next steps in the case, and he was able to work through it during two check-in meetings. The young person was able to move forward with helping his siblings with the additional information we provided.

5 PRACTICING STRATEGIC SHARING OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Engaging in advocacy that is directly related to one's personal experiences can be traumatizing, tiresome, and greatly rewarding all at once. It is important for any individual, specifically young people, to receive training and support to understand the pros and cons of sharing their stories. There should always be a willingness and true purpose for individuals to share personal stories. Youth should receive support and training on how to share their experiences in a way that informs stakeholders while protecting themselves from unnecessary harm and trauma.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Casey Family Programs and Foster Care Alumni of America define strategic sharing as "Telling your story in a way that is meaningful, effective, and safe."[11] One of the most delicate to navigate components of creating a youth-led program is utilizing the members' experiences without exploiting the individual. Any policy change, public awareness campaign, or social movement can be enhanced, even fueled, with personal experiences. The National Resource Center for Youth Development's Youth Leadership Toolkit states: "Being asked to tell your story or even share a detail about your past can be flattering. It promises understanding and empathy from other people. But sharing details about your life without strategic sharing can backfire." (p. 1)[12]

PREPARING TO TELL YOUR STORY

Teens and emerging adults do not always understand the impact of sharing such personal experiences (which are sometimes traumatic) with the public or systems professionals they are still involved with or receiving services from. They are also often unaware of the impact of sharing their full name associated with their story or the impact of sharing information about other people in relation to their own experiences. Program management must train and prepare young people for the potential consequences of sharing personal experiences by helping them identify the components of their stories they want to share, and the impact of identifying other people or certain elements of their stories. This awareness is most important when young people are asked to be interviewed by media outlets about their experiences. The excitement and sometimes intimidation of being interviewed by a reporter might result in a piece where a young person has shared too much information that could have a lasting impact on their daily life and the people around them.

A young person was asked to be interviewed by an online news source about their opinion on police use of force. This interview was initially about this individual's opinion, but the reporter asked if they have person experience with the police. As a result of this question, the young person revealed that they were once arrested but not charged. Additionally, the young person agreed to have their full name connected with this story. Once the piece was published, this person's family and friends who had not known they were arrested, now know and treat him differently at home and in school.

ESTABLISHING AUTONOMY OVER YOUR STORY

It is incredibly important to teach a young person about the implication of sharing their story before they are given an opportunity to talk about it. One way to do this is to identify boundaries every time a young person shares their story. Once the speaking opportunity is confirmed, program staff should continue to work with the young person to identify the aspects of their experience that they want to share and should not share. Simply giving a young person a prompt and expecting them to deliver a "powerful experience" is not supporting that young person and is not realistic. Professionals need to work one-on-one with youth to draft their speech or responses. Program management should first ask the young person what is "off limits" about personal experiences. Additionally, asking the source of the speaking opportunity if it is not only possible to accompany the young person to the presentation, panel, or event as another way to provide support for the young person sharing their story, but also ask if the staff member can facilitate the event to create an even safer space for the young presenters. Having a supportive adult or professional know a person's boundaries along with the young person themselves will provide an additional level of support to protect a young person from talking about something that is off limits or retraumatizing. Another good tactic program management can use to embody strategic sharing is to teach young people how to say "no" to questions or to taking on opportunities that could make them feel uncomfortable to share their stories.

SHARING FOR CHANGE NOT TRAUMA

When program management sets standards for sharing they are also setting an example and training external partners on the most authentic and ethical ways to engage young speakers. It is essential that program management vet and assess the speaking opportunity before identifying youth members. Some questions that they can ask to determine if the speaking opportunity is appropriate are: What is the purpose of the event? Who is the audience? Is there a chance for powerful impact by participating in this opportunity, or will this opportunity simply retraumatize the participant? Staff should be sure that youth understand the purpose of the event and craft responses and identify which parts of their experience are most relevant to the reform topic of the event to deliver the message youth feel is most powerful. It is critical for those requesting youth advocates' participation in an event to understand that they attend as experts with a reform agenda. They may choose to share some personal experiences as part of their advocacy, but the event cannot be *about* their personal experience.

Those running the youth-led program must also continue their guidance of the young speakers through all the external interactions with audiences like key stakeholders, reporters, partners, and donors. Although most people have the best intentions, it is very easy for these audiences to "…treat the youth as tokens, treat a single representative as the total voice of youth…" (p.6) [13] Many professionals assume that since a young person is willing to share portions of their experience to advance systemic changes, then they are willing to answer any questions about their experience. Simply put: a young person who is willing to speak about portions of their life does not mean they are required to speak about their whole life.

OUR APPROACH TO GUIDING YOUTH IN TELLING THEIR STORIES

AUTHORING YOUR OWN STORY

Juvenile Law Center's Youth Advocacy Program Managers take seriously the responsibility of teaching youth advocates about strategic story sharing. From the moment that youth are interviewed for the position, they are directed to only share what they are comfortable sharing and are constantly reminded that they do not need to go into detail about their experiences in the justice and child welfare system during their interview to join the program. In fact, Youth Advocacy staff can go years without knowing why a youth advocate entered the juvenile justice system or why they entered the foster care system. Program managers and staff at Juvenile Law Center are aware that this practice of voluntarily sharing information is new to many of the youth advocates and therefore needs to be emphasized constantly through all interactions. One way staff ensure the autonomy of the youth advocates with their story is to have staff review and recommend edits to all content for their projects, blogs, panels, presentations, and external articles when possible. Youth advocates can change their mind as many times as they want to about what they are willing to share.

Participation in the Youth Advocacy Program's Youth Speakers Bureau provides our youth advocates the skills to not only identify what they want to share but how what they share can be influential. Youth advocates learn that audiences will get more out of a short personal anecdote that aligns with a specific policy ask than a long speech that includes every aspect of their story without a specific direction or policy ask. Youth advocates also are supported in practicing their responses or speeches before meeting with or presenting to stakeholders. In hearing their story out loud, youth advocates can better identify how comfortable they feel actually speaking about their own life. Writing about and talking about experiences allow for two very different levels of comfort for many people. One of the key takeaways of the Youth Speakers Bureau is the emphasis on debriefing the experience. Sometimes youth advocates can prepare perfectly for an opportunity, but still have it go wrong or "feel weird." Program staff need to gauge the emotional temperature of the group or individual after the opportunity and then work together to figure out how to improve next time there is another opportunity.

BUILDING GROUP SUPPORT

The yearly Youth Advocacy Program curriculum begins with team building and training in strategic sharing. This training is rooted in the same ideologies that the Casey Family Programs outlines. For many years the Youth Advocacy Program at Juvenile Law Center has contracted with a clinical social work professional to run workshops on finding safety when sharing. These workshops help the youth advocates develop tools they can use when they feel like they might be losing control over their own story. The Youth Advocacy Program curriculum is structured in this way to respect the comfortability of program participates. We understand many of the youth advocates have not openly shared their experiences with such a large group before. Therefore, our first goal is to build a community of trust and acceptance where members feel comfortable talking about their lived experiences. This level of trust is built through ice breakers, vision boards, opportunities for people to share when they want to share, opportunities for youth advocates to work in small groups and pairs, encouraged participation of all members, whole group check-ins to gauge everyone's current mood and state of mind, and open communication about what works and does not work during weekly workshops. Youth advocates share that their group becomes a form of friendship and family where they can relate to others in ways they have never been able to before.

6 YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SKILL BUILDING

Youth-led programs draw a host of young leaders with different skill sets at varying developmental stages. Some youth might show natural leadership, while others may find it harder to communicate their ideas in large groups. Youth-led programming must include developing each young person's unique skill set.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

CREATING INDIVIDUALIZED SKILL-BUILDING PLANS

As outlined in Key Component 4: Youth Empowerment to Advocate in their Own Lives and Cases, young people need an environment that encourages self-empowerment, self-efficacy, and opportunities for program members to grow into advocates for change. Young people in advocacy programs require dedicated time and support for skill building to develop into leaders and advocates. According to a study titled "Best Practices in Youth Engagement and Leadership Development," to have positive youth development, professionals need to create skill and asset development opportunities.[14] These types of programs need to engage youth through goal setting, case planning, and providing opportunities to develop and apply skills. This approach will be different with everyone since every young person brings their own skills and experience. Professionals, therefore, need to develop individualized supports to meet the young leaders where they are; some young people will need to develop time management skills while others will need to learn coping skills for stress and trauma.

In 2007, the Annie E. Casey's Forum for Youth Investment developed "Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change."[15] One of these principles highlights the importance of individual support and investment in the skill development of young members. "If the organization believes in the power of engaging youth as a strategy, then it knows that it cannot change the community unless youth feel safe and supported and have the skills to handle themselves professionally in a variety of settings." (p. 24)[15] This is particularly important for young people who may not have supportive adults in their lives to encourage this type of development. Youth will need the support and sometimes mentorship of adults to identify skills that they want to work on and can take with them when they are not in the program.

IDENTIFYING IMPLICIT BIAS IN SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Professionals who manage or facilitate youth-led programs need to diligently assess the individual needs of each member of the program and work with the young person to jointly identify which skills they want to further develop. This process is trickier than it appears. Professionals may instinctually try to make an assessment or judgement about what the group members need instead of letting them identify what they want to develop. Often this assessment can be riddled with stereotypes and white patriarchal views of professionalism and success in the workplace. A great advocate or leader does not always need to dress in business casual clothes, speak without using slang, and introduce themselves to people they do not know in order to be successful or professional. Skill development focused on these topics represents implicit biases- a stereotype that individuals are unaware they are imposing based on structural racism- about what makes a good leader or speaker. To avoid imposing these biases on the young advocates, professionals should ask them what they want to develop to best achieve their personal goals.

Professionals who have some experience working with young leaders might also feel compelled to prepare them to act or present in a way that matches the predominant work culture of the audience. There is merit in laying out what to expect from a situation and an audience, especially for young speakers with system involvement. They will likely encounter professionals that hold or have held some power over them or their case. This can be extremely intimidating for the young person if they are not prepared and supported through this encounter. There should never, however, be explicit instructions about: the tone or vernacular a young person should use; interacting or communicating with audience members in a manner that makes them feel uncomfortable; or how they should dress unless it is required by the host of the speaking engagement. This may mean helping to supply clothing they feel most professional wearing. A professional who works to authentically and ethically engage young leaders needs to set the example for the audience to accept and listen to the young experts as they are. This professional also needs to be confident in themselves, the young leaders, and the situation they are bringing those young leaders into so the speakers can feel safer being themselves.

SKILLS LOOK DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE

When people think about skill development, they may think of learning to write more clearly, speak more engagingly, facilitate a large group, develop better time management, or even learn to draft a professional email. In reality, a skill can be anything someone uses to better accomplish a goal. One of the first steps in helping a young person better identify what skills they need to grow is to point out skills where they already excel. The person who rarely speaks up in group or the person who just cannot stand to write may be the best artist in the group. Skill development will be different for each person. Additionally, skill development seemingly might not have anything to do with achieving a workplace goal. Many teens or young adults have experienced trauma or neglect, a learning or developmental disability, an unstable living situation, or unmet therapeutic needs. The skill sets that need to be developed might be coping mechanisms, conflict resolution, or even learning how to schedule a therapy appointment. The job of those running the youth-led program is to identify and nourish each person's strongest skills and encourage the growth of other skills that will help that individual achieve success.

OUR APPROACH TO SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Youth Advocacy staff work with youth advocates who come from various backgrounds and experiences. When a young person first starts the program, one or more program staff will meet with that individual for an on-boarding meeting. This meeting includes questions about why the young person wants to be involved with the program, brief questions about their length of time in the juvenile justice or foster care systems (once again reminding them only to share what they are conformable sharing), contact information, and other questions to assess what kind of support network they have and what type of support they may need. New members are also asked questions about their interests, aspirations, learning styles, and skills that they want to develop. Staff must conduct at the very least two additional meetings or check-ins with each youth advocate through the program year: a mid-year check-in specifically about goal setting and an end of the year check-out about the program year. Most youth advocates choose to check in much more frequently.

Youth advocates are encouraged to participate in regular check-ins with staff. Staff continue to ask them when they stop by the office or during workshops if they want to meet or need support. They are constantly encouraged to set up check-ins with staff. The unique nature of the Youth Advocacy Program is that young people are not forced to meet with one designated staff member. Every Youth Advocacy Program staff member is trained on how to conduct check-ins through the shadowing of check-ins with the consent from the youth advocate. They can meet with any staff member based on their comfort with them. This aspect of the program helps build trust and gives the Youth Advocacy Program staff member the opportunity to learn more about each person and the support they need.

Juvenile Law Center program staff also meet as a team to discuss common issues the youth advocates bring up in check-ins to brainstorm solutions together (youth advocates are asked for permission to share with the rest of the team). Program staff work with the youth advocate to identify resources to help build their skills or address their needs. Checking-in with youth advocates is more than simply handing one of the members a brochure, web address, or phone number; staff sit down with youth and make sure that they understand the process and what is expected.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GROUP DEVELOPMENT

The social work staff are trained to support each youth advocates' individual development, but they are also trained to respond to challenging dynamics, or unexpected issues and situations that arise during workshops. Through a series of ice breakers, team building exercises, guest speakers, and trainings, staff can see where a youth advocate might flourish and where they might need more support. Over the course of their three years with the program, staff can see the difference in the young person's development. Tasks that may have taken them a few weeks can later be accomplished in one week. Someone who may have struggled to participate in an ice breaker is now speaking in front of an audience of 50 people. Another member who may have stormed out of the group when they became frustrated, now will ask calmly to step out for a moment with the support of a staff member. These developments occur because of the individualized support from staff, a sense of community they feel from the group, and personal growth.

CONDUCTING SKILLS WORKSHOPS

Youth advocates in their end of the year debrief/evaluations over the past few years identified the need for more general skill-based workshops. In response to this feedback, the program staff instructed the graduate-level interns to developed, general, skill-based workshops as identified by the group members and program alumni. The interns were provided guidance from program managers to work with other staff at Juvenile Law Center to develop and facilitate workshops for the youth advocates. Two of the most requested workshops were budgeting and resume building. The resume building workshops encouraged on-going support of youth advocates by staff outside of the program since so many youth advocates wanted to keep working with the staff members who supported the development of their resume.

These workshops can vary based on the needs of the young people in the program which will change from year to year. Many youth advocates and graduate interns have expressed a desire to have workshops on mindfulness, exercise, educational planning (especially when you have bills to pay and family to care for), applying for health care, preparing for court, and advocating for yourself in court. It is likely that if one young person needs help with something, many more need similar support.

REFLECTIONS FROM YOUTH ADVOCATES

Youth advocates identified how skill building during workshops has supported both their professional and personal development. Youth expressed that workshops have enabled them to create and deliver elevator pitches about policy topics and issues. They are better able to present clear and concise information with confidence because they feel prepared to do so. One youth advocate referenced an instance in which she was speaking live in front of rolling cameras and was able to persevere through her immense nervousness because the program gave her the skills to do so.

Youth advocates also feel that the skills they develop through workshops provide professional support through expanding their experience on their resume. Youth noted that the program has given them the opportunity to facilitate workshops themselves, publish articles and blog posts and travel outside of Philadelphia to discuss social justice issues. On a personal level, they feel that their participation in the program has developed their social/emotional skills. Youth advocates explained that participation in the program has taught them to collect their thoughts before they share out loud, to avoid conflict and not to act too impulsively.

7 A WHOLISTIC APPROACH TO ISSUE SELECTION AND CAMPAIGN DEVELOPMENT

Picking an issue to build a campaign around must be an inclusive process. A successful campaign must include feedback from the young leaders in your program, other young leaders outside of the program, collaboration with internal staff and their projects, input from professionals in the field, movement around that issue at the local, state, or national level, and a viable solution to the issue. Juvenile Law Center is committed to carrying forward the recommendations of the youth advocates. Therefore, relative alignment with the organization's projects is a key consideration.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

THE APPROACH OF A YOUNG ADVOCATE

Creating a space for young people to lead policy change efforts in their community can allow for long lasting solutions and systemic change. The experience and expertise of young people are resources that can be used to influence community change efforts, but they are often not seen this way.[16] This may be due to their age, lack of experience, or education level. Traditionally, young people do not find themselves in leadership roles in their community or if they are in leadership roles, they do not have much influence over the development of the solution.[16] These generalizations about how much young people can contribute to change inhibits creative solutions to many social problems.

Researchers suggest that young people are roughly three years ahead of adults when it comes to understanding major issues facing their peers and communities.[13] This means that young advocates can identify a problem and a solution years before adult change makers begin acknowledging the issue and discussing the solution. To achieve the overall goal of creating change, young people believe that sheer will, lived experience, and advocacy need to come together to develop a collective campaign. Young people not only have the desire to change their community, but also have many ideas about how to change them. Engaging young people in the process of developing campaigns is vital to identifying social problems, the root causes of those problems, and solutions for long-standing system change. Sustainable system changes can only happen when young advocates are actually included in the policy change process. And the very first part of this process happens when young people are included in the selection of the issue to develop a campaign.

SELECTING AN ADVOCACY TOPIC

Sometimes youth-led groups will choose to develop solutions for a singular issue over a long period of time- like ending homelessness, mental health awareness for youth, or ending mass incarceration- while other youth-led groups will vary or change their issue more frequently to adapt to changes in their community or the political climate. Whatever approach the group takes, the members need to be careful when picking their issue. Some program managers may be inclined to pick the issue for the young leaders because of their professional background or experience, while other program managers may be inclined to allow the young members to identify an issue without any support or guidance. The approach is much more complicated than that. Youth may be experts in their own experiences, but they also need to become experts on the existing work around an issue. They need to learn about the professionals already working to address this issue, and the likelihood of success if this issue were chosen for a campaign. Though helping the young leader make informed decisions is more time consuming than simply picking the topic for them, the project will inevitably have more buy-in from the young leaders because they chose the project.

Once the issue is finally chosen, youth advocates and program managers need to decide which parts of the issue they will tackle. When advocates do not identify specific aspects of an issue to remedy, the whole campaign can become unwieldy. Focusing on specific part of the issue is done through a root causes activity derived from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. Youth advocates are given an activity where they are asked to consider the "symptoms" or consequences of a particular issue. Then they are asked to think about why the issues occurs; what are the root causes. Additionally, they are asked to look even further at some of the those causes and why those causes occur. As a group, youth advocates and program staff identify which root causes seem most important to tackle first and then build their campaign around those issues.

BUILDING CONNECTION AROUND AN ISSUE

Another element to consider around developing a campaign is how to connect the youth advocates to the issue and how to connect the local community to the issue. Motivation for advocacy is often rooted in a cultural connection to the problem.[7] To connect with the issues, program management or facilitators must create a space to talk about how one's experience in their communities is impacted by these issues. Often race and culture is a large part of this conversation. The problem must include how everyone in the program is personally connected to the problem. Once this is discussed, the solutions also must be shaped with these community members in mind, so they are willing to be part of the implementation of the solutions. Policy changes can use historical, religious, and artistic ties to those advocating for change and those experiencing the struggle to create a closer connection to the issue.[7] A plan to make long lasting systemic change will not be successful if those advocating for the change are not invested in the implementation of the solution.

Juvenile Law Center's Youth Advocacy Program campaigns follow a project calendar that runs from October to May. New campaigns are chosen each year by the youth advocates with the support of staff. After the youth advocates finish their advocacy project during their October-May program cycle, a Juvenile Law Center staff member, intern, or fellow who is not directly on the program staff debriefs the past program cycle with each member of the program individually (see Key Component 9: Supporting Program Growth through Assessment and Evaluation for additional information about this process). Part of this debrief includes asking them what issue they might want to work on in the future for the following program cycle. This information is compiled during the summer months and presented to Juvenile Law Center staff. Staff are asked about potential partners, potential policy change around these issues, and whether the issue aligns with current initiatives at Juvenile Law Center. After consulting with a broad range of staff from legal, development, administrative, and communication teams, the topics are narrowed down so the youth advocates can vote on two or three potential issues once the new October- May program cycle begins. After the youth advocates spend the month of October team building and learning about strategic sharing, youth advocates are then given information about each topic, and with the support and guidance of program alumni, are asked to vote on a topic by mid-November. There are always a variety of topics that the youth advocates identify, including those suggested from prior years. This can be difficult for a young person who is still being impacted by the system they are looking to transform to identify just one avenue for change. A great deal of information about the issues and group emotional support needs to be provided by program staff and program alumni to ensure that the group members feel comfortable with the final choice. Once the topic is chosen, the group begins their campaign. The issue selection process, therefore, begins and ends with the youth advocates direction and decision. Youth advocates are invested in the topic because they identified the problem, were educated on the issues, and then voted for the final advocacy campaign.

IDENTIFYING POLICY WINDOWS

In recent years, the program management at Juvenile Law Center have incorporated more opportunities to teach the youth advocates how to make informed decisions around campaign topic selection. This process is rooted in the research of John Kingdon's multiple stream theory and the process of policy analysis and open policy windows.[17] Program staff teach youth advocates about the importance of identifying a policy, politics, and problem stream to create a perfect window for a successful campaign. The theory goes that if advocates identify a problem with enough people impacted, a policy solution that is viable, and sufficient political support to advance the solution, a window of opportunity opens where public policy can be introduced and implemented.[17] Previously, program staff supported youth advocates in identifying issues based solely on personal experience and passion. Unfortunately, many of the projects that were chosen based on these standards only had momentum in the beginning of the campaign but fizzled without a clear policy solution or strong political support, leaving youth advocates disappointed in the process. Since revising the decision-making process based on lessons learned, the youth-led campaigns have reached new levels of success and sustainability because the groups saw implementation of their projects, and partners were identified to carry on the work.
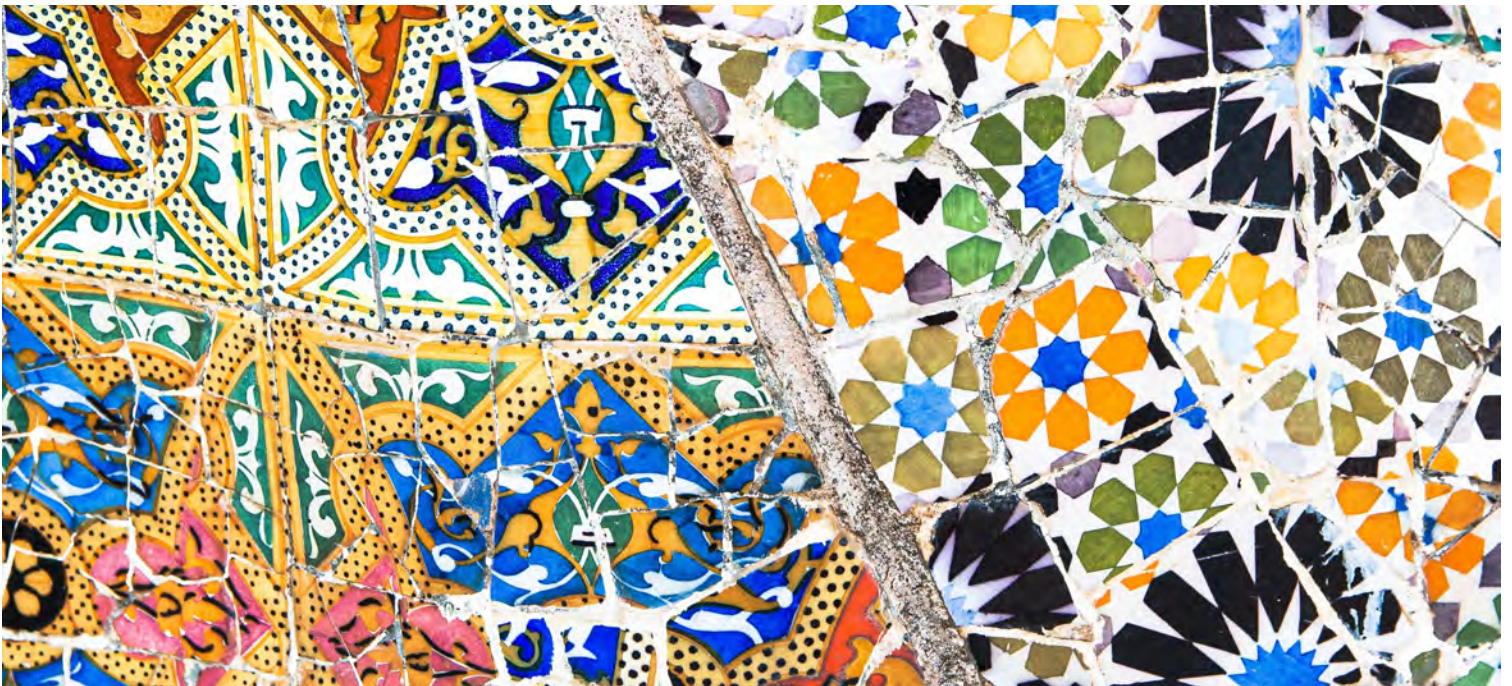
RECOGNIZING ROOT CAUSES

The Youth Advocacy staff has taken a more deliberate approach to issue selection and campaign development over the years to ensure that the youth advocates have the space to also address root issues of systemic racism in their projects. The juvenile justice system and foster care system disproportionately impact Black, Latinx, and Indigenous young people and other young people of color. If advocacy efforts do not include discussions of race and how a young person's race has an impact on their access to resources and opportunities, then any effort to implement long lasting systemic change will come up short. Youth Advocacy staff do not shy away from deliberately calling out race, oppression, and privilege during weekly workshops. Staff remind youth advocates that they should not feel like they need to hold back race as a core part of their recommendations, feedback, or experiences. Program staff and youth advocates also work together to ensure they are on the same page with the language they use in workshops, written pieces, and presentations when talking about race.

YOUTH ADVOCATES' REFLECTIONS

When asked about the development of their campaigns, the group was particularly excited about the project from the 2018-2019-year Operation: Education. This policy project marked the first time in the history of the Youth Advocacy Program that both Youth Fostering Change and Juveniles for Justice collaborated on a single issue. The youth advocates chose to focus on education because it is a relevant issue for every young person. They also recognized that there was a policy window for this issue because of the free tuition for foster youth bill that was on the horizon in Pennsylvania. The program provided youth with the knowledge they needed regarding policy windows so that they could make an informed decision about which issues were best for their project focus. Learning about policy windows prompted them to consider: Which topic will go further? Which issue can wait? Which issue cannot wait? Youth advocates think it is important to have all relevant background information for potential policy projects before they make a choice. They were able to come to a consensus on this topic because an environment of non-judgement was established in the workshops by the program managers which allowed everyone to share their own perspectives.

8 COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT PROGRAM GROWTH

Building a successful campaign requires buy-in from both allies and decision-makers. An important part of the program manager's job is to build and sustain partnerships with similar grass-roots organizations and government bodies to help advance the campaign and then implement the policy changes. Additionally, collaboration with like-minded and supportive groups provides young members a sense of community and inclusion with advocacy efforts beyond the walls of your organization.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

ENGAGING IN NETWORKING

Establishing and sustaining partnerships to advance a program or a project must be at the forefront of the campaign. The process of collaboration can seem daunting or may not be prioritized due to capacity restrictions in nonprofit organizations. However, collaboration, though time intensive, is worthwhile since policy changes become infinitely more possible when organizations and partners are working together to support its success. An obvious partnership that most programs within nonprofit organizations develop is with their funders or grantmakers. A good funder/grantee relationship will include a strong connector or networking role from the funder to ensure that their grantees are connected to other organizations that support similar work.[18] This type of collaboration also ensures a stronger collective voice, visibility, and success when advocating for change around specific issues.[18] Initial communication with partners working on the same issue or problem helps those running youth-led programming and young people better understand how to best tackle the solution to the problem. An investment in your longstanding relationship with your funders can also influence the initiatives of the foundation. A grantee can demonstrate the importance of certain aspects of their mission and gain additional support from the foundation to perhaps alter foundation priorities and direct funds for that initiative to the organization and key partners once a trusted relationship is established. Collaboration with peer partners and between grantee and funder is essential, but these collaborations are also the easiest to initiate for nonprofits because they already have an inherent relationship with their peer partners and funders.

PARTNERING WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The most difficult type of collaboration is establishing and sustaining partnerships with decision-makers who often have differing views about solutions to the problem and may even argue that there isn't a problem at all. Persuading key decision-makers to support and advance the policy change your campaign outlines is essential to the success of the project and having the youth advocates feel a sense of accomplishment. This type of collaboration with key decision-makers requires skill and support from professionals and adult project managers.[13] According to the Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change, "Unless there are intentional efforts to cultivate an audience, create demand among influential adults and connect the work they are doing to other organizations and ongoing initiatives, there is a risk that the work either falls on deaf ears or fails to stick within that community in a meaningful way."[15] Gaining the respect and buy-in of policymakers who are able to impact change at the root of the problem that the youth-led group is trying to address will help ensure that change is systemically implemented. The best way to get this buy-in is to come to the table and listen to their expertise, thank them for their willingness to listen to youth-voice, and request further collaboration as the campaign develops.

OUR APPROACH TO COLLABORATION

The Youth Advocacy Program at Juvenile Law Center has; 'a long history and intention of collaborating with funders, community partners, and key decision-makers. Connecting with other community partners and with other young leaders, especially Black, Latinx, and Indigenous young leaders and other young leaders of color, provides an opportunity to exchange campaign strategies and establish a sense of community support and community collaboration for system change.

COLLABORATING WITH OPPOSING AND LIKE-MINDED PARTNERS

Since the beginning of the Juveniles for Justice and Youth Fostering Change programs, Juvenile Law Center staff believed that the most responsible approach to systemic changes in the foster care or juvenile justice system requires the support and buy-in from the stakeholders of the systems that we are looking to change. The youth advocates meet regularly with key decision-makers in Philadelphia, state-wide, and nationally including the Commissioner of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services, the administrative judges in Philadelphia, Elected City Council Officials, State Legislators, and U.S. Senators and Council Members. Our youth advocates are almost always met with respect and appreciation by these policymakers. They not only appreciate the youth advocates' willingness to speak about their sometimes-traumatizing experiences in the juvenile justice and foster care systems, they also are challenged by the thoughtful campaigns and recommendations for change that the young people have worked diligently to develop. Conversely, these experiences offer the youth advocates an opportunity to hear directly from policymakers about how systems need to run and why certain decisions are made for young people in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. This knowledge helps the youth advocates craft solutions that are more likely to be implemented.

Equally important, programs need to establish relationships with other grassroots, youth-led organizations, movements, and projects. As the Youth Advocacy Program began to deliberately address the intersectionality of race in the yearly campaigns and the experiences of the youth advocates, program staff also acknowledge the need to connect with other Philadelphia-based youth-led groups, artists, and mental wellness professionals, especially those that identify and uplift the experience of Black and Latinx persons. Program staff, with the recommendations of the program participants, are including -- and continuing to work to include -- trainings and

collaboration with more Black-led and Latinx-led groups. These relationships are crucial to empower the youth advocates in their advocacy campaign knowing that they have support and guidance from others in the city.

PREPARING OUTSIDE PARTNERS

All interactions with outside partners take a great deal of preparation from program staff to ensure that youth advocates can clearly and confidently convey their message to their audience. However, an additional layer of preparation needs to be taken by program staff when youth advocates are asked to speak in front of audiences that might hold or have held a great deal of power over their own cases. For example, youth advocates in Youth Fostering Change may give presentations to family court judges that oversaw their case and youth advocates in Juveniles for Justice may have to give presentations to probation officers that supervised their case. Youth advocates need to feel that their anger and fear is validated by program staff, and they need to know they will be supported during this experience.

The preparation not only happens with youth advocates but also with the partners or key stakeholders. Program staff need to communicate these concerns to the partner and request that they follow the same guidelines program staff use to protect youth advocates. One example of working to keep youth advocates safe and supported during interactions with large audiences is having questions from audience members written down on note cards and vetted by program staff facilitators. This ensures that no questions are asked that may retraumatize the youth advocates. Interactions between key decision-makers and youth advocates is also one of the primary reasons why the Youth Advocacy Program Managers teach strategic sharing (see Key Component 5 to learn more about strategic sharing).

WORKING WITH MEDIA PARTNERS

The Youth Advocacy Program also partners with various media outlets to share recommendations, lived experiences, and project campaigns. These partnerships are tricky to navigate. Media outlets often want as much detail as possible and want people to share their full names. Youth Advocacy Program staff have protocols that state that youth advocates should never feel they have to talk about a part of their story that they are uncomfortable sharing and they can share whatever form of their name that makes them most comfortable. These protocols also cover informing youth advocates of the possible implications of sharing photos and first and last names publicly. Program management works closely with communications staff at Juvenile Law Center to ensure that every media opportunity has the young person's best interest in mind, images and names are used with consent, and the young person knows they always have the freedom to decline or step away from an interview.

REFLECTIONS FROM YOUTH ADVOCATES

When the youth advocates were asked about working with external partners, they recognized the necessity of collaborating with community partners in order to increase the support and overall effectiveness of policy projects. The youth advocates discussed the many different partners they collaborated with for the "Broken Bridges" project (Juveniles for Justice's 2017-2018 campaign and publication to address harsh, harmful practices the youth advocates experienced in juvenile placement facilities). To garner support they met attorneys, judges, and Councilwoman Helen Gym from the city of Philadelphia and testified at City Hall. To acquire feedback from other young people about their experience in institutional placements they sought the input of youth with experience in the foster care system who were involved with the Youth Healer's group and other youth groups throughout Philadelphia.

9 PROGRAM GROWTH THROUGH ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION

The needs of teens and young adults are ever changing, especially those who have experience in government run systems. Just as the needs are ever changing, so are the solutions. To run successful programming, feedback is needed from the program members and from audiences served by the youth advocates. This feedback should be collected in a variety of ways to grow and sustain the program.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Both young people and the programs themselves benefit from youth participatory evaluation. Young people develop skills and competencies along with the sense of empowerment while programs can utilize youth experience in the program to improve the programming.[19,20] A youth-engagement evaluation approach remains loyal to the principle of ethics for social workers and human service professionals because the process epitomizes an overall respect for people and their experiences.[12] A program runs smoothly when the members of the program have an investment in the work, but to be invested in the work, program members need an opportunity to direct the curriculum and build the infrastructure of the program. They build the practices that work best for them.

YOUTH FEEDBACK IS EVALUATIVE

One common type of program evaluation is contracting with an unbiased external researcher who is not associated with the program. This type of evaluation is difficult to access because of the funds required to hire a researcher and because of the time the researcher must dedicate to the full analysis of the program from start to finish. There are, however, other ways to ensure that members of the program are giving valuable feedback about the management and function of the program. The notion of gathering youth feedback is not intuitive; young people are often viewed as the learners or the students, not the instructors. Adults with specialized experience are often seen as the professionals with the most valuable vision and skills. Young people with systems experiences or those who have experienced extensive trauma, are especially excluded from the opportunity to provide concrete feedback and suggestions for program development. These young people have a myriad of professionals in their lives instructing most aspects of their education, mental health, home life, relationships, etc. Rarely are these young people given the opportunity to speak about their own lived expertise and how that can impact and improve these systems. Additionally, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other persons of color are historically further excluded from the opportunity to provide feedback about their own systems experience. This component once again addresses the central theme of youth-led advocacy: having youth with the most experience at the decision-making table including in the evaluation process.

COMPILING PARTNER FEEDBACK

Though youth feedback builds the foundation of long-lasting youth-led programs, the partners who invest time into hearing the youth-led projects and campaigns also need a platform on which to give suggestions and feedback. This practice reiterates the need for a wholistic approach to programing and project development. The program team cannot neglect the expertise of other professionals in the field if the goal is collaborative system change. This interaction is also important to continue to build and nurture the partnership ties necessary for project success.

OUR APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT: CONDUCTING PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

The Youth Advocacy team at Juvenile Law Center has developed several modes of evaluations since the program developed in 2008 ranging from paper surveys to program participant interviews, to regular engagement of youth advocates in the development of curriculum and program structure. All these forms of evaluation are necessary to our measures of success. Juvenile Law Center defines success through (a) the number of youth members in our programs; (b) program retention; (c) the knowledge, skills, and interest our youth advocates develop through their active participation in our programs; and (d) the lasting impact the Youth Advocacy campaigns have on the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Program staff adjust the program structure and curriculum through surveys, staff observations, and debriefings. Youth Advocacy Program staff also conduct ongoing individual, in-person or over the phone check-ins with the youth advocates to gauge how youth are progressing in the program, if they are feeling connected to the topic, whether they are learning the skills they want to be learning, and if they feel a sense of community in the group. This evaluation process has helped to successfully maintain positive retention.

Much of the feedback program staff use to change the curriculum or structure of the program is given by youth advocates during regular weekly interactions. Program staff ask for feedback after youth advocates have completed an activity to assess what worked, what did not work, and whether the activity is one we should continue to use in the future. Every group of youth advocates is unique each year and responds differently to different types of facilitation. The best evaluations and changes have happened on the spot, as opposed to later in a survey or during a debriefing. Debriefings are also conducted after each speaking engagement to ascertain what worked, what preparation might have been valuable that was not offered and any other feedback that can be gathered while impressions are fresh.

CONDUCTING YEARLY DEBRIEFS

In the early years of the program, program staff would hand out a paper survey to the members on the final day of workshops to collect feedback about the past year. The program staff changed this process once we realized that the paper surveys did not yield any tangible feedback from the youth. Youth advocates often sped through the survey and almost never provided written responses. Since then, program management developed an extensive end of the year "check-out" form that is completed between the youth advocates and a staff person after the program year is complete. Although this process lacked anonymity and admittedly presented the issue of corrosive responses due to power dynamics at play, the youth actually began giving concrete feedback about the program and how it could be improved. We found it helpful to have youth advocates fully engaged in the conversation and assured that feedback and suggestions were not only welcome but essential for the sustainability of the program. However, the power dynamic between youth advocates and program management became overly apparent, and staff realized that too much of the feedback was influenced by this power. In 2018, program management decided to have a staff member, intern, or fellow outside of the Youth Advocacy team complete the end of the year check-outs with the youth advocates to allow for more unbiased feedback.

The questions asked in the debrief include: Did you find that your voice came through in the final product of the project? Did you feel like you were given opportunities to speak by staff and your group members? What skills did you develop that you did not have before? Do you have snack suggestions for next year? Do you have suggestions for group activities next year? How could the project have been better this year? What topic would you want to work on next year? The answers to the debrief questions are gathered and given to program staff so they can make necessary changes to the program structure for the next program cycle.

REFLECTIONS FROM YOUTH ADVOCATES

When the youth advocates were asked about the evaluation of the program and their input, they thought the program managers responded to their needs through assessment and valuing their feedback. The youth advocates referenced that through formal and informal evaluations (surveys and observations) the program managers saw a real need for an emergency fund. Youth advocates were often confronted with situations of immediate need, such as: rent money, diapers for young children or food. One young person shared that he could say with confidence "everyone in here got helped out at least one time by Juvenile Law Center." Program managers responded to this need by internal budgeting and successfully applying for additional grant funds to support youth in crisis. A combination of formal and informal assessments also revealed a need for extra check-ins regarding mental health and additional resources. Program Managers incorporated systematized, regular check-ins with youth because of youth responses to evaluations.

IN CLOSING

Youth-led advocacy is the key to accelerating sustainable change in our communities, states, and nation-wide. Juvenile Law Center's youth advocacy staff and youth advocates are committed to building the field of youth-led advocacy with authentic and ethical components that highlight the expertise of teens and young adults with lived experience. The decision-making table should not be reserved for professionals who are detached from the young people they are tasked to serve. The decision-making table should not be a platform for teens and adults to be retraumatized. The decision-making table should be a place where professionals and young advocates, with supportive adult staff, work together to identify and develop solutions for lasting change.

Thank you for taking the time to read through these components and learn from years of development, restructuring, and hard work of Juvenile Law Center's Youth Advocacy Program.

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