

Tips for Creating Effective Youth Advisory Councils



Direct youth involvement offers potential benefits to the young people—both those who help to develop the program and those served by the program—and also to the organizations. To name but a few benefits—youth gain experience and confidence; organizations gain a fresh perspective on youth culture; and organizations develop more effective outreach. The essence of youth involvement is a partnership between adults and young people - one in which each party has the opportunity to make suggestions and decisions and in which the contribution of each is recognized and valued. Following are tips for creating effective youth advisory councils within your agency.

1. Recognize that involving youth is a two-way street. Youth and adults must work to make the relationship effective and meaningful.
2. Involve a critical mass of youth in the agency's work. One young person cannot represent all youth. Create an advisory council of least eight to ten young people.
3. Identify at least a half-time staff person to coordinate the agency's youth advisory council. This staff person should be responsible for, and have sufficient time to contact young people on an individual basis at least monthly, coordinate logistics of two in-person and monthly on-line meetings; represent the interests and opinions of the young people in day to day work at the agency; and advocate within the agency for increased involvement of the youth advisory council.
4. Define categories of youth expertise to be represented on the council. For example, include youth with expertise in new media and social networking, someone with experience designing or implementing an effective peer education program, and/or someone who knows youth culture.
5. Make certain that youth represent the target population the agency is trying to reach. For example, if the work involves ameliorating health disparities, identify GLBT youth and youth of color who have expertise/experience with these issues and/or who working with or mobilizing these target populations.
6. Request that national, local or state agencies nominate young people for inclusion on the advisory council. Youth who are connected to local organization are better supported between meetings. Connections to other organizations improves young people's capacity to provide expertise to your agency and increases the sustainability and effectiveness of young people's efforts.
7. Ask youth to fill out applications to become youth advisory council members.
8. Choose youth who are clearly leaders, have the expertise needed and are well supported by local or state organizations.
9. Provide young people stipends to recognize, professionalize and incentivize their efforts.
10. Provide youth with the training they need to have confidence in their areas of expertise and to work collaboratively with the adults in the agency.
11. Provide adult staff with the training they need to work effectively with youth.
12. Clearly define and express agency expectations for young people's involvement. Share these expectations with the youth and with adult staff.
13. Be cognizant that timing is an issue. Hold meetings when young people are available. Hold in-person meetings at least twice a year and then convene youth by phone or on-line in between meetings.

14. Provide young people with other professional development opportunities, such as going to conferences, attending networking events and participating in training sessions on issues of interest to them.
15. Provide youth with feedback and clearly demonstrate the impact of their efforts.

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