

Establishing & Sustaining Advisory Groups with Young Adults

Written by Youth MOVE National Staff



Mission

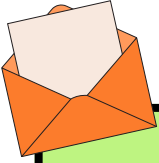
Youth MOVE National connects, supports, and develops youth leadership in advocacy to create positive change. We practice authentic youth engagement through youth driven decision making by elevating youth voices of lived experience. We ensure that young people are heard and valued as leaders in the agencies, communities, and systems that impact their lives.

Vision

Youth MOVE National envisions a future in which young people are valued as empowered leaders, advocates, and designers of communities that are built for all youth to thrive.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this issue brief is to provide youth-serving individuals and organizations with best practices and considerations when being tasked to create or sustain an advisory group with young adults. More and more decision-making spaces are becoming intergenerational, integrating the wisdom of both youth and adults in order to continually improve upon youth services and programs at the local, regional, and national levels. Using the 5 W's (Why, What, Who, When, and Where), each section contains helpful prompts and key considerations around fundamental and intentional concepts such as function, funding, and feedback.



AN OPENING NOTE FROM THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:

Hello Reader! I'm Te Jay McGrath, the Assistant Director at Youth MOVE National (YMN). Prior to YMN, I had the experience as a Transitional-Age Youth Program Coordinator doing things like 2SLGBTQIA+ outreach, HIV testing and counseling and case management. It was through this work that I was first tasked with starting a youth advisory council for a grant deliverable. To be frank, I did not know where to start. (Neither did my supervisors!) So, I had to do a lot of researching, learning, and practicing through trial and error on my own. Since then, I have provided technical assistance and training on this topic, as well as participated in the planning, recruiting, sustaining (and even dissolving) of a number of youth collectives, cohorts, and chapters - and a lot of what I've learned will be reflected in this brief for you!

Recently, there has been a noticeable momentum of grant-funded, grassroots, and statewide youth advisory group start-ups. It must be that agency leaders are realizing that having genuine, intentional youth perspectives, especially those with lived and living experiences, in some sort of advisory capacity is critical to the sustainability and success of the organization's programs and services. Better late than never?

LANGUAGE NOTES

1. Throughout this issue brief, terms like youth/ young adults may be used interchangeably - just keep in mind that Youth MOVE National is talking about individuals roughly within the 14 to 29 year old range. We know that definitions and ranges of youth differ all over the country, and even with the grants you receive.
2. Terms like advisory group, advisory board, advisory council, etc., will be used interchangeably as well. Just like age ranges and definitions of youth, we notice in our technical assistance (TA) work that, depending on the state or funding source, these groups are named all sorts of things. For the purpose of this issue brief, the focus is on any type of group that is blended with youth and adults who are serving in some sort of advisory capacity for an organization or agency.

LET'S HEAR FROM THE YOUTH!

1. As a young adult, what are some of the things you consider prior to joining or applying for an advisory board?



I consider several factors: Does their impact statement resonate with me? In what capacity do they want me to show up—not just as an advisor, but as an equal with meaningful outside work? Am I being compensated for my time? Also, I consider the demographics of the board; what percentage of the board is youth? Finally, I reflect on how the board can contribute to my professional development.

- Carmen from Colorado

2. If an organization is struggling with recruitment or retention, do you have any ideas of non-monetary incentives?



Opportunity for growth is a great way to have incentives other than monetary. This can include opportunities for networking or any important event that young people involved can attend. By putting them in spaces where their voices are elevated allows for skill building in the real world. Connections to people who could help them with their career, job, interest, etc!

- Mayda from Delaware

3. Has there ever been a challenge working with adults in an advisory group setting, and if so, how did you come to a resolution?



Adults look for the "easy" person, someone who participates without hesitation, is talkative, and can hold a conversation with ease. Unintentionally, adults overlook those who are more quiet (from firsthand experience), which may make quiet or introverted people stray away from these things. My resolution is to make the group setting split up, have conversations in small groups to get to know everyone, before they are comfortable sharing in a large group setting.

- Lindsey from California

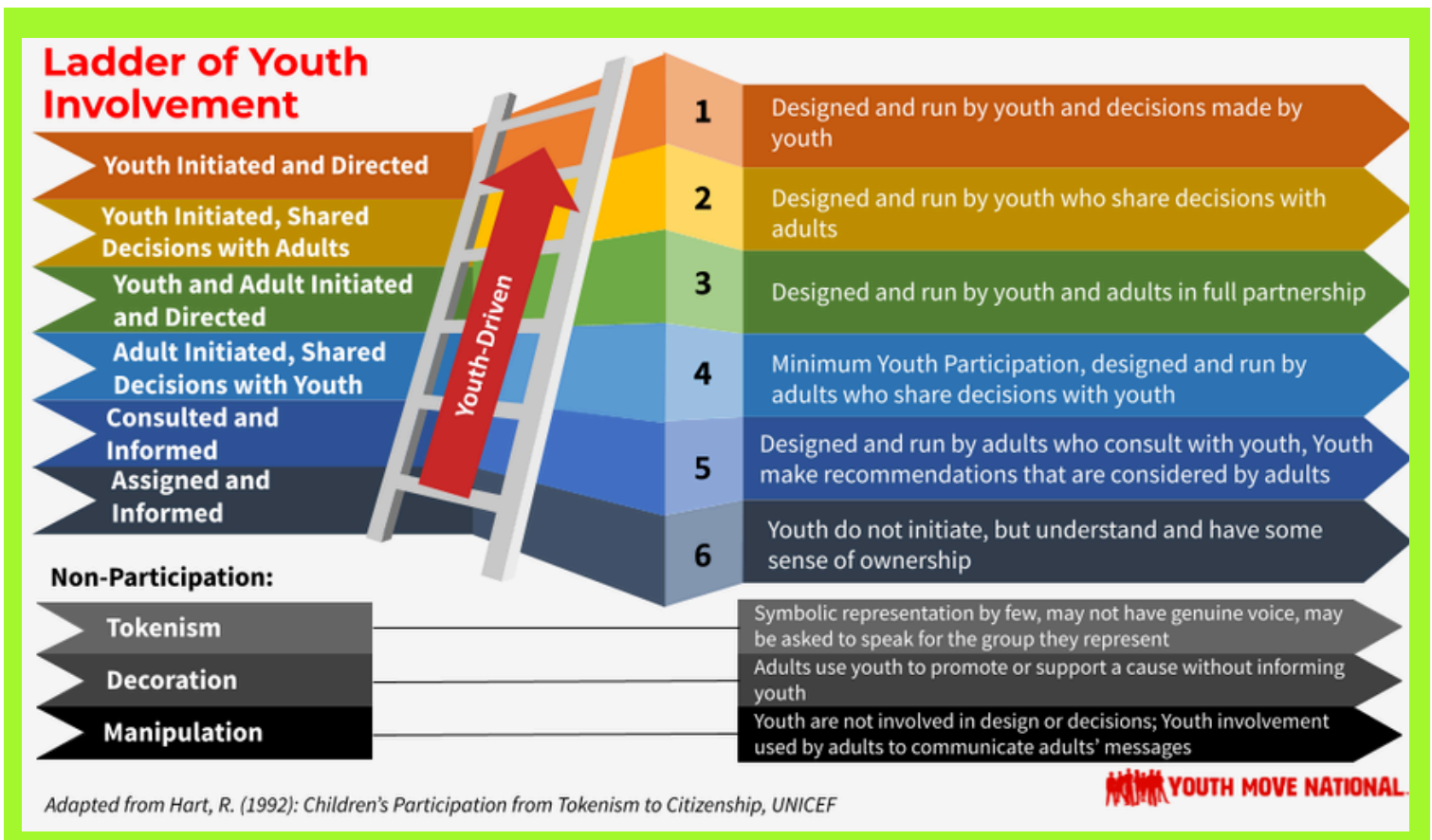
Think big picture for a moment!

HART'S LADDER

Before heading into key considerations for your youth advisory group, it's important to share Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Involvement (or Participation) to help put the importance of youth and adult partnerships around decision-making into perspective. Think of this as an assessment and/or aspiration tool to gauge the success of your youth advisory group.

The ladder provides a framework for understanding different levels of youth involvement in decision-making processes, from tokenistic non-participation to genuine youth-led decision-making.

While the ultimate goal of this tool is to promote youth-led or true youth-driven decision-making, it's important that we recognize that not all efforts will be able to reach that top rung. We know this in our work *and* what we have to work with - it's not easy. And that's totally okay, it's the intentionality, and trying that is important!



THE 5 W'S FRAMEWORK

There are so many different moving components of what should be implemented or at least considered within an effective advisory group of youth and adults. While thinking about what would be the best way to cover as many fundamentals as possible (because, as we know, there are a lot of nuances, certain parameters, funding requirements, and even laws pertaining to youth advisory councils), the **5 Ws Framework** came about!

The why, what, who, when & where aspects will provide some sort of organized guidance around this highly requested topic.



Each “W” section includes a couple of purposeful prompts, followed by some key points and considerations we encourage you to keep in mind while either establishing or sustaining advisory groups with young adults.

WHY - Purpose, Mission & Name



A passionate purpose in addition to a strong mission and vision statement will help guide your group's work forward.

Before you do anything, you must first ask yourself and your organization a simple, yet fundamental question: why? Why is establishing and sustaining a youth advisory group important? It seems almost silly, but starting with your why, and equally as important - being honest with yourself around the answer, is vital to both initial and long-term success and sustainability. If you don't know your “why”, you don't have a purpose, and if you don't have a purpose, you don't have a mission, and if you don't have a mission, well ... you really don't have much of anything to start with.

The critical thinking and idea generation around your “why” needs to be met with just as much intention, dedicated time, and careful consideration as any of the more actionable “W's” that come next. Without examining your why, your advisory group will lack purpose, direction, and substance, and won't last long. And with a dishonest why, not being truly honest about where you and your organization are really at with readiness around embedding youth voice in your decision making process, and the real reason why that is, youth will feel tokenized and used. It's a misconception that when things like this fail, it has a neutral impact. This is not a “oh well, I guess that didn't work”. This could actually cause harm to the youth you are working with and potentially even trauma if working with already systems-impacted youth. This is all to say, find your why, and be honest - it's the first step for a reason.



Purpose

Prompt: Why is having youth representation on advisory groups important to our organization, agency, or work?

Key Considerations:

- Think about the reasons your work is important with youth collaboration
- Have your organization assess the current gaps and needs with young people in your community
- Participate in a community mapping or environmental scan activity



Mission and Vision Statements

Prompt: Who are we? What do we stand for? What do we do? How will we do it?

Key Considerations:

- Lay out mutual principles and values
- Create and wordsmith these statements with youth
- Research other youth advisory groups' mission statements for guidance if needed



Name

Prompt: Does the name of the group reflect the goals or who it represents?

Key Considerations:

- Consider a group name that is unique to your area
- Ensure there is no confusion with another group with a similar name
- Begin to have discussions about what a logo would look like



WHAT - Function, Funding & Feedback



A youth advisory group is set up for success by defining clear objectives, implementing effective processes, and welcoming intentional feedback.

Now that you have a purpose, mission, and name, the next step would be to explore the function, funding, and feedback aspects. The function is all about putting your mission into attainable or measurable goals and/or action steps. This could entail having clear objectives that are built into strategic 3, 6, and 12 month plans. This is going to give your group a workable road map.

To help accomplish or shepherd these goals, thinking about the structure and governance logistics of the advisory group is important, too. The structure of advisory boards and councils is going to differ from one agency to another, from one state to another. We all know that funding is a substantial challenge in this work, especially pertaining to initiatives specifically for youth. So when considering the WHAT, think about whether there is a system or process in place to ask youth for their advice (hence the term advisory) already. If so, is what they share truly being taken into consideration and being implemented? And if not, consider making a formal process first before implementation of our advisory council to ensure youth won't be tokenized.



Function

Prompt: How will the group effectively utilize resources, people, tasks, and time to achieve the purpose?

Key Considerations:

- Set clear objectives and expectations for all members
- Idea generate short term and long term goals that are mutually agreeable
- Define a governance structure with roles and responsibilities - Officers vs. general membership
- Have actionable/tangible items to complete and then follow up at next meeting



Funding

Prompt: Will funding be needed to support and sustain the efforts of the advisory group? What sources of funding will you use?

Key Considerations:

- Provide an honorarium to youth members for their time and expertise
- Apply for small, local grants and unrestricted funding opportunities
- Look into alternative sources of "in-kind" donations



Feedback

Prompt: How will members of the advisory group provide feedback to one another, and how will they receive feedback from those they are advising?

Key Considerations:

- Incorporate the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) method
- Involve regular data collection, feedback mechanisms, and periodic reporting to inform continuous quality improvement (CQI)
- Ensure the advisory process evolves effectively based on input and insights
- Celebrate successes and generate solutions around challenges

WHO - Role Clarity, Marketing & Retention



Considering those internally involved within the advisory group is just as important as those externally involved.

Adults inherently hold at least some level of power and privilege in decision making spaces over youth, whether consciously or not. So, intentional training beforehand around topics such as the foundations of youth engagement or intergenerational collaboration can help staff and adult supports establish that mindset or understanding in advance. Certain policies and practices can be put in place before involving youth in an advisory capacity. One way to approach this as an adult in these spaces is to determine whether or not the agency is doing things TO, FOR, or WITH youth. Are youth OBJECTS, RECIPIENTS, OR RESOURCES? (Lofquist, W., 1989)

Investing in and compensating young people, as well as offering personal and professional development opportunities inside and outside the advisory meetings, is essential to keeping them active and interested in the work. The possibility of youth participants returning in the future and assisting with recruitment efforts and growing professionally within your organization is more likely to happen, too!



Role Clarity

Young People:

Prompt: What does the role of a young person look like?

Key Considerations:

- Youth have intentional decision-making authority within the group
- Youth are the experts of their own lived and living experiences
- Youth are co-designing, co-collaborating, co-facilitating advisory group efforts with adults

Adult Supports:

Prompt: What does the role of an adult support look like?

Key Considerations:

- Adults are fostering safe and affirming spaces for all with young people
- Adults are encouraging equitable power-sharing conversations
- Adults are trained on youth engagement foundations and effective youth-adult partnerships
- Adults are helping with simplifying systems language, defining acronyms

External Partners:

Prompt: What does the role of a partner look like?

Key Considerations:

- Establish an MOU or Linkage Agreement between the advisory group and partner that clearly defines the roles and responsibilities, timeframe, and goals of the partnership.
- Host future meetings and events for the advisory group
- Leverage their low barrier resources that can support the advisory group's mission



Marketing

Prompt: How does your organization get young people interested in joining the group?

Key Considerations:

- Utilize various social media platforms for your marketing efforts
- Keep in mind what is popular/trending in your area with your intended demographic
- Make sure your flyers and event announcements are visually appealing and using youth-friendly language
- Be fully transparent of what is being offered and expected



Retention

Prompt: How does your organization ensure youth stay? What can your organization do to grow membership?

Key Considerations:

- Invest in the professional development of the young people
- Have youth identify new and creative strategies to bring more youth aboard
- Maintain a relevant and active presence online and in the community
- Explore new monetary and non-monetary incentives or compensation

WHEN - Timelines & Meeting Times



Commitment is key to sustainability; so is time management and flexible meeting times.

Imagine this - you woke up far too early to get ready for work after staying up far too late the night before getting errands done. You got ready, sat in traffic forever, all to just get to work where you ... well ... have to then work! Finally, the end of the day comes, you're tired, hungry, probably a little cranky, and are just looking forward to putting on some PJs and watching your favorite baking show. Would you be excited to, instead, devote a few additional hours of work that may or may not be paid, after all of that, to just serve on an advisory council? Probably not! So then why would youth be? Youth also have errands, work, school, obligations and responsibilities, and yes, probably enjoy a good baking show after a long day as well. Why would young adults be excited about showing up more than anyone else would be? Now, can you solve for a lot of these factors? Probably not, but what you can be strategic about is the WHEN.

Having a good WHEN can turn serving on an advisory council chore into something actually fun and exciting. It's your role to strategize, incentivize, and figure out literally and figuratively how to meet them where they are at (and when) ahead of time. Wanting to recruit young adults aged 14 to 17? 1 PM on a Monday when they are in school is not a great time. Want to recruit college students? Friday nights, when they are working and hopefully having a little fun, is not a great time. Looking to get youth from the West Coast involved in an initiative? 9 AM Eastern, not a great time. I think you get what we are trying to convey here.

Youth MOVE National has historically found the hours of 6 - 8 PM ET on Tuesdays and Wednesdays to be the best times to try and get as much participation as possible, while not stressing out staff too much about working outside of what may be their normal working hours. *And here's another a reason why having a solid WHY is important* - without a solid why, centering youth and their schedule, which may (or may not) mean decentering yourself and your schedule, can become the difference between an excited, "Yeah, it's worth it, this is going to be fun" and an indifferent, "Ugh, I'm dreading this, how do I get out of it" in which youth will absolutely pick up on. Find a good time for youth, not yourself. If you don't know, don't guess, ask them.





Parameters

Prompt: What restrictions or limitations must be considered prior to inviting young people to the advisory group?

Key Considerations:

- Consider all mandated meetings and reporting measures for the group
- Have an understanding around age ranges, min/max number of youth reps needed (quorum), and jurisdiction
- Include a varied group of youth members

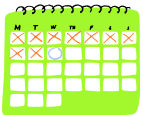


Meeting Times

Prompt: Are meetings being held at mutually beneficial times for everyone in the group?

Key Considerations:

- Organize group polls which provide flexible schedule options for youth
- Meet the needs of the times that youth are available
- Accommodate schedules around off hours and weekends



Commitment

Prompt: Do all members of the advisory group understand what their commitment is?

Key Considerations:

- Ensure members have a clear understanding of how much time they will need to dedicate and participate in the group
- Note that flexibility and transparency are important when shifts need to be made
- Be upfront about the projected timeline of the advisory group

WHERE - Format, Outreach & Transportation



Selecting the right meeting format and location is critical to ensuring youth voices are included. The best approach depends on your group's geographic reach, resources, and participant needs.

Don't worry, after reading our WHEN section you probably get it, so we'll keep this short. The simple fact is that if you are driven by a strong why, a strong purpose, and a strong mission, we hope that you are deeply invested in decentering yourself and centering the youth you seek to serve (again, that's the importance of a strong WHY). To do that, you don't make youth conform to you, your wants and wishes, your policies and norms; you need to conform to them, and that includes quite literally, and WHERE they are at.

Is there a local cafe that youth usually hang out at? See if you can rent out a room there, or grab a corner. Are young adults playing sports at the rec center? Go to the rec center. If you think your office conference room is a little stark and stuffy, and you have to drive an hour to get there, youth probably will too *in addition* to having no way to get there! Go somewhere fun, or offer a hybrid or entirely virtual space. Even think through the format. Robert's Rules of Order is already hard to understand and follow, and approving of last meeting's minutes is boring - why not talk through things while playing a video game? Seriously, some of the best, most deep conversations in a youth's life can be centered around activities that have nothing to do with the topic at hand. If you are centering youth, don't center "traditionally adult" things.



Meeting Format

Prompt: Will your meeting be held virtually, hybrid or in-person?

Key Considerations:

- Select the right meeting format and location to ensure a variety of youth voices are included.
 - Virtual - Increased accessibility, flexible scheduling, cost effective
 - Hybrid - Flexible partnership-building, change of environment, mixed youth participation
 - In-person - Stronger relationship-building, fewer tech challenges, food & swag



Outreach

Prompt: What are some ways your organization can maximize its recruitment efforts?

Key Considerations:

- Go where youth actually spend their time
- Scout local coffee shops and cafes, parks, campuses, drop in centers
- Connect with already trusted adults, mentors, and volunteers in community



Transportation

Prompt: Is your organization easily accessible to young people?

Key Considerations:

- Provide public transportation or rideshare vouchers / passes / gift cards
- Partner with other agency transportation services
- Lean into community partners or public spaces for meetings



A CLOSING NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

Growing up, I was asked to serve on a lot of advisory councils and youth work groups, probably like the ones Te Jay was tasked with. And to be honest, I was probably one of the youth giving folks a lot of both the trial and error of figuring it all out. Although of course I had a lot of my own reasons and things happening that caused me to to be disinterested, disengaged, and generally indifferent to these groups, reflecting on this time as an adult in the field now, like Te Jay, I can see a lot came down to adults simply not meeting me where I was at, and at the time, I really did need the help, support, and guidance of adults who were willing to do that. Having a strong why, what, who, when, and where doesn't just make for a good advisory council or meet a grant deliverable: it makes for good mentors, coaches, near-peer supporters, etc. For systems impacted, traumatized youth like myself, having strong "W's" could be the difference between just another adult using me for their own means, adding to my harm, adding to my distrust, or finally finding an adult they can trust, who can help them on their healing journey far sooner than at least when mine did. Find your why, and translate that into the actionable other W's; it truly could have a much larger positive impact on a life than you could ever imagine.

ADDITIONAL HELPFUL RESOURCES

[Toolkit for Implementing Authentic Youth Engagement Strategies Within State Advisory Groups >>](#)

[Affirming Facilitation Techniques in Youth Settings >>](#)

[Hart's Ladder of Youth Engagement >>](#)

If you would like to request technical assistance and consultation from Youth MOVE National, you can submit your request [HERE!](#)

