

FORMING A YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

The 12 Steps to Forming a Council
Recruiting Youth
Developing a Strong Infrastructure
Sustaining the Council



This section of the Toolkit is customized for foster youth, but principles are generic and can be used for any group. “Youth Council,” “YAC,” and “Council” will be used here to mean “Foster Youth Advisory Council.” This section will describe what is meant by a Foster Youth Advisory Council, the steps that you must take to set up a successful Council, and some sample paperwork to help you set up your Youth Advisory Council.

What is meant by "Foster Youth Advisory Council"?

A Foster Youth Advisory Council is an organization that brings together foster youth to work for positive change in the foster care system. The Foster Youth Council works to advise programs, organizations, government agencies, policymakers, and other individuals and groups. A Council also works to educate and empower members to be leaders and advocate for positive change for foster youth.

"YAC (Youth Advisory Council) has allowed me to know different procedures in getting stuff done in the foster care system. It has helped me make more informed decisions on how to advocate for myself and for others."



Kaleshia Manning, Former Foster Youth

Foster Youth Advisory Councils may also work to engage other foster youth by encouraging them to get involved with a variety of activities and opportunities.

"Being a part of a Youth Advisory Council has been such a great experience. It was on a youth advisory council that I learned the importance of advocacy, leadership, and empowerment. As a member of a national youth council, I am committed to introducing youth in foster care across the nation to those important factors."



Jennifer Thomas, Former Foster Youth

How Foster Youth Advisory Councils act as vehicles to empower foster youth.

Often foster youth face issues they feel they can't control or that they want to discuss and bring to some resolution. Youth may feel isolated and helpless, alone and powerless, desperate to change their situation and confused about how to bring about the needed change.

These feelings of frustration and confusion can be changed when a foster youth becomes involved and empowered.

"One way to promote empowerment and participation of youth is through Foster Youth Advisory Councils. While in care, participating gave me a chance not only to be involved in a system that had control over my life, but to help other youth in the system as well."



Lisa Evans-Arnold, Former Foster Youth

Empowerment allows youth to feel in control and capable of participating in the decisionmaking process that affects their lives. It allows them to find their purpose and voice. It is a powerful tool when it yields drive and vision and commitment to a cause.

To ensure that youth in foster care have a strong voice within the system that is raising them, it is important for them to form and take part in organized and unified coalitions. A Foster Youth Advisory Council is a great example of an effective coalition that empowers youth to create change in the foster care system.

Foster Youth Advisory Councils exist in many states and local communities, and on programmatic levels. There are still, however, many places where youth in care do not have a voice and where Foster Youth Advisory Councils are needed.

How to form a Foster Youth Advisory Council

including discussion of youth and adult partnership and “steps.”

As discussed earlier, a Foster Youth Advisory Council provides an organized way for foster youth to actively participate in the matters that affect their lives.

Although the primary Council activities are driven by youth, adult supporters play a key role in the success of the Council. Adults work with the youth in every aspect of the Advisory Council’s work. The Councils are built around a youth and adult partnership – a voluntary relationship based on equal status and shared power that serves as the foundation of the Council. Youth and adults are equally involved in a common cause and have an unspoken or formal obligation to each other.

“Participating on a Youth Advisory Council can give youth a chance to practice skills they can put to use later on in life.”



Danielle Pouliot, Former Foster Youth

When youth and adults form a partnership, youth and adults work in full collaboration and are both recognized and valued as resources.

Tips for youth/adult partnerships (see book 5 of this toolkit for more discussion around this subject)

1 Have an open mind.

2 Ensure that youth and adults have equal status.

3 Share decisionmaking, responsibility, and accountability for the Council

4 Respect and appreciate the skills and talents that all members bring

to the table

5 Embrace the spirit of teamwork

"Steps" to forming a Foster Youth Advisory Council

1. Pitch the Idea from the "Top"

Some adults can be resistant to the idea of involving youth in decisionmaking. It is easier to begin and sustain a Youth Council in the foster care system if the top person(s) at the agency or organization is committed to the idea. If having a Foster Youth Advisory Council becomes policy or a priority, then agency staff will ultimately comply.

Although it may be a little more difficult, foster youth in partnership with adults such as agency staff, can also begin a Youth Council. They should pitch the idea to whoever will listen, and work together to educate the agency about the benefits of having a Youth Council. Through persistence, time, and education, others will come to realize that youth involvement is essential to running a successful youth program.

2. Obtain Financial Support

Think about the level of resources that you will need to support the work of your Council. Depending on what you plan to accomplish, you may have to seek funding to support your work. Put your purpose and mission in writing so that others will understand what you are planning to do. You may have to develop a "proposal for funding" to obtain financial support. Adult supporters or members of your Council may be able to provide assistance.

3. Recruit Foster Youth

Make a strong effort to engage all youth. Invite ALL youth to participate, not just your friends or "high achieving" youth. In fact, don't hand pick any of the foster youth. Tell all the foster youth in the agency that a Youth Advisory Council will provide them with a forum to be heard and give them the opportunity to get involved in changes that will impact them and other foster youth. Allow foster youth to make their own decision to participate.

Some youth will come running. Others will want to be involved, but may be reluctant to come forward. When youth see that the foster youth and adults involved in the Council are committed, they will ultimately lose their skepticism and will want to get involved.

As the Council evolves, the members can determine more formal youth recruitment and selection procedures that may involve an application process. Since young people (especially foster youth) often move on or are in transition, it's important to develop a concrete plan for ongoing recruitment.

4. Address Logistics

Your Foster Youth Advisory Council will need a person to coordinate the Council's activities and meetings.

Here are items to consider:

- ✓ Establish a meeting that respects the schedules and lives of both youth and adults.
- ✗ Identify a meeting place that is familiar and comfortable to both youth and adults.
- ✓ Consider transportation issues.
- ↗ Provide snacks and/or other refreshments.
- * Establish an open agenda.

5. Establish the Council's Purpose


A Foster Youth Advisory Council should have a purpose that is clearly stated and easily understood. As a group, think about what you want to accomplish with the Council. Highlight what your Council will stand for and its reasons for existing. The purpose should be reflected in the mission statement.

6. Support Council Members in Working Together

Ensure that Council members and supporters understand the group process and respect the basic principles of group work:


- Learning to work together and respect one another.
- Clearly identifying expectations and responsibilities of members.
- Developing a strategy for resolving conflict.
- Accomplishing the goals of the group, not those of the individual members.

More information about group work and group dynamics can be found in books and on the Internet.




7. Establish Solid Youth & Adult Partnerships on the Council

The foundation of a Youth Advisory Council is the partnership formed by the adults and youth. Educate the Council members and adult supporters about adultism. Both adults and youth should feel comfortable with and agree to abide by the principles of a youth and adult partnership. (For more information on adultism, please see *Youth and Adults working in Partnership* in this toolkit.)



8. Review examples of existing youth councils

Do not try to re-invent the wheel. There are a number of councils that already exist. Highlight specific youth councils and allow them to serve as models. Get in contact with other youth leaders and adult supporters.



9. Establish a Sound Infrastructure

A council's infrastructure is very important. It is essential to sustaining the council. The infrastructure is the foundation of the council. A concrete infrastructure consists of mission and vision statements, goals and bylaws.

First, develop a mission statement and goals that overlap with the Council's purpose. Review examples of other Councils' mission statements and goals to get an idea of what yours should be like. Be sure that your mission statement applies to your Council. Make it general, but yet specific enough to identify the Council's purpose. Also, create specific objectives or goals that fall under the primary mission. Your vision statement should be future focused and detail where and what the Council intends to be. Be sure to obtain input and feedback from everyone.

Second, develop bylaws or an operating agreement that will govern your Council's activities. All procedures and processes of the Council should be identified in the bylaws or operating agreement, including the application process.

As you develop the infrastructure, youth and adults may feel it necessary to create roles and positions, i.e., president, vice president, treasurer, adult supporters, etc. The development of roles further formalizes the Council, its purpose, and responsibilities.

A recruitment and application process should be developed by the youth to screen and select future members of the Council.

Developing a strong infrastructure will take some time. Plan to revise it several times before a final draft is achieved.

The bylaws or operating agreement should allow for revisions by the Council. This ensures that the procedures and processes are adapted as the Council matures.



10. Develop an "Agenda"

An agenda is like a map – it will guide your work and give your Council direction. In creating your agenda, identify your overarching goal and develop objectives that are consistent with that goal. Objectives should be specific, measurable and attainable, realistic, and tangible (See *Promoting Youth Leadership* for more information on "S.M.A.R.T." goal setting.)

Create a "realistic" action plan with specific steps to execute the objectives. Think about all of the tasks and activities that you need to complete to accomplish your goal. In your plan, identify who is responsible for getting things done and include time frames.

11. Identify Projects for the Council.

Highlight projects that fit into the Council's agenda. One of the Council's duties may be to advise the agency that it represents. The Council should be involved in other meaningful activities that will help to achieve its overall mission. The activities and/or projects should be decided upon, planned, and carried out by youth and adults of the Council.

12. Develop a Strong Network

Create alliances with other Youth Councils and youth-serving agencies. Partner with youth groups and agencies with similar missions and goals and develop a partnership or coalition. Also, communicate with youth groups and agencies that may have slightly different purposes and agendas. You may find ways to collaborate and learn from one another. By collaborating with other groups, you can help build a powerful youth-driven network that promotes youth involvement. (See *Practicing Youth Advocacy* for more information on building relationships and cultivating community allies.)

So Where Do We Go from Here?

After all of that hard work, you'll now have to work at sustaining your Youth Advisory Council. It's an ongoing process that will require you revisit the "12 Steps" periodically.

The steps outlined above will help you to build a strong foundation for your Youth Advisory Council. Other factors that are specific to your Council may arise and will need to be addressed.

Like any group and/or business, developing and sustaining an effective Council takes time and commitment from both youth and adults. It is an ongoing process that will require coordination, consistency, and hard work by youth and adults on the Council.

"Involvement is beneficial to youth because they are afforded the opportunity of improving the leadership, advocacy and life skills. We know that we are empowered and have the voice to represent ourselves in the foster care system when we as youth are involved in planning."



Tameka Jefferson, Former Foster Youth



CYC (a youth advisory council) had a huge impact because I got to testify before the California state legislature, speak before groups on issues that were important to me.

Lisa Evans-Arnold, Former Foster Youth



Networking

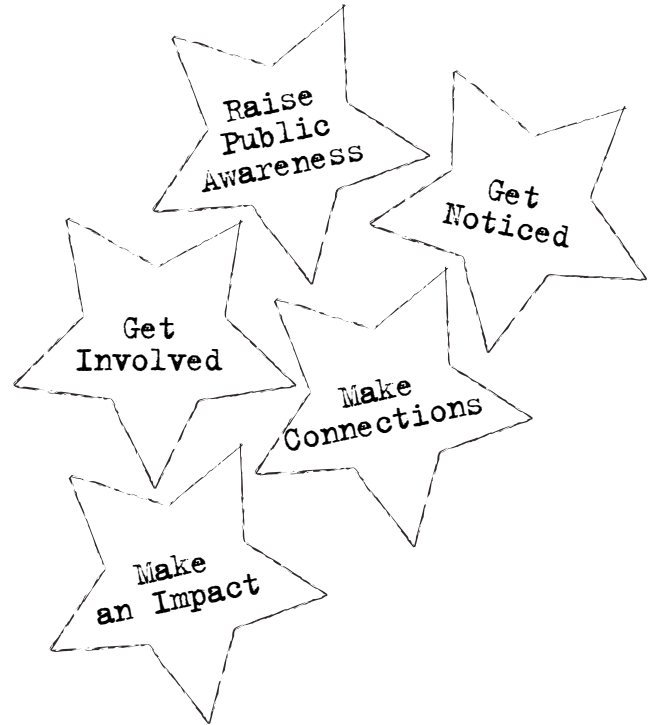
Networking is a very important concept. Networking allows the sharing of information. It involves a chain reaction between people and organizations.

Networking is the ability to create and maintain an effective, widely based system of resources that works to the mutual benefit of two or more people or groups. It is the process of linking up with others to exchange information, advice, contacts, and support. It is good practice to make as many connections as possible to youth groups and people and agencies that work with youth.

Be sure to keep record of all contacts and always follow-up!

Remember that outreach is the key to developing great networks. The primary goal of outreach is to educate, communicate, and raise public awareness. Your Council will begin to

advance when other youth, adults, agencies, and communities begin to recognize your work. Be active in your community, attend meetings relating to foster care or youth, and volunteer to give presentations about your organization and what it's doing to improve foster care. It is important to give foster youth a voice whenever possible.



"What advice would I give to someone starting a Youth Advisory Council? Just do it, just get out there, get started, and go for it. If the first meeting is only 2 people, so be it. It will continue to grow."



Debbie Dominick, Former Foster Youth



Sample Council Member Code of Conduct

1. I agree to respect all fellow Council members, staff, and guests.
2. I agree to attend all meetings, on time, and to actively participate throughout the meetings.
3. I agree to not transport or consume alcohol or illegal drugs during meetings and/or travel times.
4. I agree to behave in a manner that brings respect to the Foster Youth Advisory Council at all times.

Violation of any Conduct Codes as specified in the Conduct Contract will be a reason for board dismissal. The Foster Youth Advisory Council has the discretion to facilitate board terminations.

I _____ have read and understand the Rules specified in the of Conduct

SIGNATURE

DATE



Sample Agenda

Location
Date
Time

- Welcome
- Call Meeting to Order (President)
- Adopt the meeting agenda (Secretary)
- Review the minutes of the previous meeting (Secretary)
- Officers and Committee Reports
 - President
 - Vice President
 - Treasurer
 - Committee Chairs
- Old Business
- New Business
- Plan for Next Meeting
- Adjourn Meeting



Sample YAB member Application

Sample Application
FOSTER YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Thank you for applying for membership with the Foster Youth Advisory Council. Please answer all questions completely. For questions that do not apply, simply write N/A. You may type the application or print neatly in blue or black ink.

GENERAL INFORMATION

NAME: Last First Middle Initial Date of Birth: Age:

Address: Street Name and Number City State Zip Code

Home Phone Work / Office # Cellular / Other # Email Address

Have you ever been in Foster Care? If yes, how old were you when you entered care?
No. of years spent in care: State(s) lived in while in care: Age when left care:

Have you ever been in Kinship Care? If yes, how old were you when you entered care?
No. of years spent in care: State(s) lived in while in care: Age when left care:

Were you adopted? Non-relative If yes, at what age? Adopted by: Relative or (Check One)

If you answered yes to at least one question, please contact _____ for record purposes only.

EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION

Level	Name, City & State
Post Secondary	1, 2
College / Vocational	1, 2, 3
High School	1, 2, 3

CURRENT EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION

Do you Work? Yes / No If yes, please provide:

Employer	
1.	

Do you have siblings? Yes / No

YOUR EXPERIENCE IN CARE

Please answer questions A-H as they apply to you. If more space is needed, you may attach additional sheets. Please label all attached sheets with the letter of the corresponding question.

- What can you bring to the Foster Youth Advisory Council?
- How can your experience in foster care help other foster youth?
- What do you feel foster youth need to be successful?
- What issues relating to foster care do you feel strongly about? Briefly Describe.
- Please describe any advisory councils, committees, or groups on which you have previously or are currently serving. Or, if you have never served on a council, describe what leadership and team work means to you.
- How can the Foster Youth Advisory Council help you?
- Please list your hobbies and interests and any additional comments, information or skills.

AFFIRMATION

I _____ affirm that all of the above information is true. I understand that this application will be reviewed by an application review committee. If selected as a member, I vow to read, sign and abide by the operating agreement and code of conduct.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Find these forms and other sample documents on the CD included at the Toolkit



Sample Committee / Subcommittee Report



Committee:

Committee Chair:

Committee Secretary:

Committee Members:

Other People Present:

Last Meeting (Date/time/place):

(Minutes of last meeting should be attached)

Short-Term Issues and Goals (Try to give dates for goals):

Long-Term Issues and Goals (Try to give dates for goals):

Assignments & Projects

Assignment	Lead Person Responsible	Due Date

Recommendations:

Next Meeting Date/Time/Place

**Note: Always attach the meeting agenda to the committee notes.

The Child Welfare League of America is the nation's oldest and largest membership-based child welfare organization. We are committed to engaging people everywhere in promoting the well-being of children, youth, and their families, and protecting every child from harm.

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