

Youth Action Boards (YABs): Best Practices and Implementation Guidance for YHDP Communities

The following information was provided by Round 1 YHDP communities, Technical Assistance Providers, and YAB representatives on how to effectively design and implement Youth Action Boards (YABs) with a focus on sustainable authentic youth engagement.

San Francisco Youth Policy and Advisory Committee (YPAC)

- **Consistency:** The San Francisco YPAC consistently meets one Thursday every month from 5 – 7 pm at the Library. This level of consistency around time and meeting location has helped encourage sustained engagement. Additionally, consistently scheduling meetings for the evening has been accommodating to the schedules of youth with lived experience who may have school, work, or other programs to attend during the day.
- **Open Membership:** The YPAC operates using an open membership model, meaning that regular monthly meetings are open to all youth experiencing homelessness or who have previously experienced homelessness who are interested in attending. Interested youth attendees are encouraged to RSVP so they can be compensated for their time. Meetings are regularly attended by 20-40 people.
- **Adult Partners with Decision-Making Power:** Having an adult partner with decision-making power to work with the YPAC has helped ensure that the voices of the YPAC are not only heard, but that action can be taken to implement their feedback. Strong adult partnerships and advocacy have also made it possible for the YPAC to operate with open membership and for members to be consistently compensated for their time.
- **Multi-Pronged Outreach:** San Francisco YHDP maintains a listserv of roughly 30 program staff who conduct outreach for the YPAC meetings and operates a running listserv of all youth with lived experience who have attended a YPAC meeting. In addition to these direct outreach efforts, YPAC meetings are promoted through social media and provide encouragement for new and interested participants to attend.

- **Robust and Authentic Role in Local Decision-Making:** When agencies are planning for programs or services that impact youth experiencing homelessness, they come to the YPAC to pose questions to the group and receive feedback. The YPAC has provided feedback to diverse parties including the Mayor, City Council, and CoC Board and have provided feedback on diverse topics including Coordinated Entry for youth, subsidy models, youth point-in-time counts, and program design for host homes.
- **Recognition:** It is important to ensure that the hard work and contributions of YABs are recognized. San Francisco YHDP has invested in building awareness, publicity, and visibility around the YPAC and their role in shaping the youth homeless response system.
- **Youth-Led Planning:** San Francisco YHDP has looked to YPAC to determine the topics and activities they would like to undertake in the future, with the YPAC providing feedback on topics they would like to address. This will help sustain and expand YPAC engagement as the community continues its work to prevent and end youth homelessness.

Santa Cruz Youth Advisory Board (YAB)

- **Clear Process and Structures:** The Santa Cruz YAB has established clear processes and protocols for guiding YAB membership and meetings, including a standard application form for new members and detailed agendas for regular meetings. These processes provided detailed information and transparency around what the YAB is the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of all YAB members from the outset of involvement.
- **Clear, Youth-Led Mission:** The YAB operates with a clear mission that guides the group’s work: “YAB Members believe that youth homelessness is preventable and solvable; our community can be one in which all youth and young adults are housed, thriving, and experience a healthy transition into adulthood.”
- **Group Agreements:** The YAB has developed a strong set of group agreements to ensure that all YAB members feel respected and are able to comfortably engaged in the process. The group agreements also help ensure that the YAB’s activities stay on track with the group’s mission.
- **Youth and Young Adults as Experts:** YAB members are respected as experts on youth homelessness, which is reflected in the roles and responsibilities of the YAB. YAB members advise the Homeless Action Partnership (HAP) and YHDP Steering Committee on the Coordinated Community Plan to End Youth Homelessness, assist

with reviewing and approving project proposals, and add youth voice, perspective, and expertise to all aspects of ending youth homelessness in Santa Cruz County.

- **Professional Development and Self-Care:** The Santa Cruz YAB is not only a forum for adding youth voice and expertise to local projects; it is also a forum for youth to learn from each other, develop new skills, and engage in professional development. YAB meetings provide space and opportunities for professional development and self-care, including working on resumes and opportunities for social engagement.
- **Strong Community Partnerships & Connections:** Santa Cruz operates YAB Coalition Meetings, which provides an opportunity for community partners working to prevent and end youth homelessness to come together with the YAB to discuss program design and implementation. The YAB Coalition Meetings create a supportive and effective space for all organizations to come together with the YAB around solutions and for the YAB to provide feedback where necessary. These meetings serve to inspire new and continued community connections and create action where possible.

Boston Youth Action Board (YAB)

- **Authentic Youth-Adult Partnerships in YAB Planning:** In the initial planning meeting to develop the YAB, adult partners worked with the YAB to figure out logistics and ask YAB approval to make certain decisions. Adult partners then met with youth to develop ideas for topics to discuss during YAB meetings, bucketed the ideas into themes and scheduled them for the year with youth feedback and approval. This resulted in the development of a YAB meeting schedule and structure organized around addressing those topics that are most urgent and meaningful to youth with lived experience.
- **Topic-Focused Discussion and Action:** Regular YAB meetings are organized so that each month is focused on a designated theme identified as important for youth experiencing homelessness, by youth with lived experience. Examples of YAB topics and themes include equity, race/class, staying involved in the community, and health. The first meeting of the month is a focus group meeting where the YAB discusses the theme; the second meeting of the month is focused on action taken to address identified challenges and concerns around that month's theme. This meeting structure allows YAB members to share information, experiences and ideas with each other and mobilize their shared knowledge and expertise into action.
- **Responsive and Flexible Scheduling:** The Boston YAB meets regularly twice a month; however, the YAB is able to meet more regularly when wanted to needed

based on local need. For example, if an RFP needs to be reviewed and additional time is needed beyond the regular meeting schedule, the YAB will schedule a time to meet again. The YAB is willing to make extra time for such activities because they are respected and are assured that their feedback is important and valued in creating solutions to youth homelessness.

- **Authentic Action and Engagement Beyond YHDP:** The YAB is funded by both the city of Boston and the YHDP Planning grant and carries out both YHDP and CoC-related work. Roles taken on by the Boston YAB include providing input of project implementation; crafting language and review of RFPs for subcontracts; and drafting recruitment notices and sitting on hiring panels for openings in projects serving youth experiencing homelessness. The YAB is a vital partner in carrying out Boston's comprehensive community approach to preventing and ending youth homelessness, including but beyond the YHDP.

Dee Balliet, True Colors Fund

Guidance on sustaining engagement with YABs during YHDP implementation and beyond:

- **Develop a dedicated work plan outside of YHDP.** YHDP work is intermittent and it is important to keep youth engaged when YHDP is less active. Youth are not required to only work on YHDP-related projects.
- **Don't be afraid to restructure the YAB.** Evaluate the current progress, workload and structure of the YAB: What have we done that has worked really well? What does the current/anticipated workload? Create goals for the upcoming year and use this moment of re-evaluation as an opportunity re-engage youth and see where they are at. For large and rural geographic areas, figure out how many representatives exist from each regional area, and commit one youth per area to the planning or leadership committee - other youth can work on other projects and initiatives.
- **Recognize and Embrace YAB Differences.** Every community is different in terms of levels of youth engagement and the areas in which they choose to focus. In San Diego, youth have chosen to focus on addressing homelessness among single adults based on the community's needs. In another community, they are focusing on strengthening the system of care for minors. The focus and role of the YAB in each community will look different based on community need and the mission of the YAB as developed by youth with lived experience.

Innovations in Youth Collaboration: Best Practices in Creating and Engaging a Youth Action Board

The following information was presented during the 3rd Annual Point Source Youth (PSY) National Symposium on Solutions to End Youth Homelessness. The session focused on how youth advocates and providers across the country are collaborating on the movement to end youth homelessness using an equity framework.

Lauren Knott, TA Provider, Technical Assistance Collaborative (TAC)

- **No Community Looks the Same:** All communities start at different places; some communities have had really robust YABs when awarded, but they weren't always that way. A common theme of all the communities is that they are continuously going through this "norming, storming, forming" process to improve and strengthen youth engagement.
- **Youth and Young Adults Should Have Seats on Decision-Making Bodies in Your CoC:** If there is not youth with lived experience on your current CoC Board, get an individual involvement. Youth with lived experience should also be on agency boards.
- **Pay Youth for Their Work:** Ask youth with lived experience how they would like to be compensated for their work and find funding sources that can provide that compensation. CoC funds are one of those funding sources that can be used for youth compensation. This is also a place to get other funders, including philanthropy, involved in your youth homelessness efforts. Also consider related costs that are required for youth participation such as transportation and ensure that youth are compensated for those expenses as well.
- **Older Adult Involvement:** Older adults have to undergo the difficult work of examining their biases when working with youth. It is not inherent that just because older adults and youth with lived experience are at the same table that everyone knows how to work together. Older adults may need to address tendencies to discount youth with lived experience due to their age (i.e. adultism).
- **Identify the Social and Cultural Barriers Between Older and Younger Adults and Work on Lowering Those Barriers:** Much of the work of breaking down barriers is relationship building, being in the same rooms and being willing to have difficult conversations. This also entails working through other barriers to participation, including scheduling meetings at times and locations that are inconvenient for youth with lived experience. Addressing these barriers is meaningful to show that youths' time and attendance is important and valued by older adult decision-makers. Additionally, holding meetings in accessible locations, providing access to childcare and food, and paying for transportation lower the barriers to participation for young people.

Abrea Ponce, Youth Action Board (YAB) Co-Chair, Regional Task Force on the Homeless (San Diego, CA)

- Goal of San Diego YAB during YHDP was to raise awareness in reentry, higher education, workforce, and child welfare because those were the areas where the majority of the barriers and gaps were happening for youth.
 - The YAB’s focus on reentry came from the recognition that youth exiting from institutions are oftentimes not considered homeless according to HUD definitions.
 - The YAB identified a need to address higher education because students living on campus and in dorms are often forced into homelessness during the summer. YAB also wanted to improve identification of these youth without making it traumatizing or uncomfortable, including providing a resource guide or asset mapping tool accessible to youth utilizing food pantries and experiencing food insecurity.
 - Connecting youth to employment that pays a livable wage is an important focus for the YAB to help youth sustain their housing and make their own exit into permanency after receiving supportive services.
 - The YAB recognized that youth who are 16 or 17 years old were falling through the gaps if they did not meet the criteria for child welfare services. This often includes pregnant and parenting youth and LGBTQ+ youth who are face abuse, neglect or rejection from their families.
- “Nothing for us, without us.” If youth are not at the table, communities will continue to struggle with ending youth homelessness. In 20 years, if we are still working to end youth homelessness, it is because youth have not been at the table.
- “We are the people closest to the problems, so we are closest to the solutions. Why are we the furthest from the resources?” There are too many barriers to housing that keep youth away from resources they need.
- Ensure youth with lived experience are sitting on boards with voting seats throughout the community. They need to be a part of the decision-making processes in your community to help develop solutions.

Nyla Viva, Youth Action Board (YAB) Chair, Regional Task Force on the Homeless (San Diego, CA)

- Just as communities are different in their experiences of youth homelessness, youth voice will look different across different communities.

- Consider different populations among youth experiencing homelessness and recognize that youth with lived experience all come from different backgrounds and experiences.
- Authentic youth engagement is not asking youth to join focus groups and provide feedback. It is putting youth at the table throughout the whole entire process and ensuring that they have the positions and opportunities that they can uphold to be the future leaders that they need to be.
- San Diego has two positions for youth with lived experience on the Regional Task Force on the Homeless. The YAB is working very hard to ensure that more youth have the same opportunities and that they can serve as mentors for other youth who become engaged in the YAB.
- Compensation is a critical and necessary conversation to take place reaching out to engage youth with lived experience to participate in the YAB.
- Realize that youth with lived experience are strong and resilient. When presented with opportunities to talk about their own experiences, they can develop solutions because they can tell then and there you what they need.
- Authentic youth engagement is more than just hearing what youth say. It is listening and knowing where youth are so they can be engaged at all parts of the system and all points within their experiences of homelessness.
- “A Roof for Every Youth” – there should be no barriers to housing for youth experiencing homelessness; we should instead be doing everything possible to position youth for success in their future.
- Making changes outside in the community requires self-reflection first, including evaluating your own views on youth experiencing homelessness and homelessness in general.
- Communities need to open positions and opportunities for youth to be leaders. Youth are not asking adult partners to be their voice, they have that voice – let them speak with it.
- No barriers, being paid, meeting youth where they are at, and being leaders are the keys to successful youth engagement.

Amy Wilkerson, Director of Youth Services, Sheltering Arms (New York, NY)

- Sheltering Arms made the decision about 3 years ago that they wanted to give youth participants voice and opportunities to become authentic leaders in their community and to make change.

- Sought and identified a group of youth from the thousands of clients that Sheltering Arms has served that would be interested in becoming leaders to take positions on YAB and other initiatives.
- Conducted outreach to all of the youth that Sheltering Arms serves and asked who would like to be part of a youth organizing movement.
- Sheltering Arms has had over 80 youth participate in the movement so far.
- It is a completely youth-led initiative.
 - Once the group of youth came together, they decided collectively on a governance structure to provide a core structure to the whole of the work that they do.
 - The group also decided what organizing activities they wanted to pursue, with a priority on ending youth homelessness. Other major issues identified have included youth aging out of foster care and ending mass incarceration for youth. Organizing activities include rallies, awareness events, and coordination with other organizations to facilitate events and activities.
 - Youth in the initiative have joined the NYC YAB, as well as boards around foster care youth and the NYC Civilian Complaint Review Board. They have also run voter registration campaigns targeting youth and organized community meetings to discuss issues most pertinent to youth.
- Ensure that everything is youth-led. YABs should be empowered to make their own plans, organize their own activities, and decide their initiatives each year. Our role as adult partners is to support them in their work.
- Sheltering Arms meets each week with youth to train them on advocacy and community organizing, as well as topic-focused trainings such as homelessness and juvenile justice reform.

Skye O’Neal Adrian, Board Chair, New York Coalition on the Continuum of Care (New York, NY)

- New York City YAB is sub-committee of the New York City CoC. The YAB aspires to be agents of change using lived experiences of homelessness as a tool to bridge the gaps between homelessness and quality of care for all youth 16-24 years living in New York City.

- The YAB mission and vision statement was created by the YAB to hold close to the purpose of and build youth ownership around the board.
- NYC YAB accomplishments have included:
 - Amendment of Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) in 2017. This Act was an issue because when youth reached age 21, they were no longer able to stay in youth-serving shelters, including those tailored to the LGBTQ+ and Trans/Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) youth. YAB conducted a lot of advocacy to get the act changed; as of 2017, every youth up to age 24 can continue accessing youth shelter.
 - The Faces of The Unity Project was launched in 2018 to spread awareness around LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and that there is now an LGBTQ+ youth shelter in every borough of New York City. The campaign featured a number of YAB board members.
 - As of September 2019, the YAB is a 3rd-time youth co-sponsor of the PSY National Symposium on Solutions to End Youth Homelessness.
 - In 2019, the YAB wrote the forward for Chapin Hall's *2019 Youth Homelessness Assessment*.
 - One YAB member is a voting member of the CoC.
 - The YAB has been providing training and technical assistance for several city, state and national organizations through webinars, conferences and special events since 2016.
- **Pay to Humanize the Data:** Although data and research are used to inform decisions, including a youth voice to bring life to that data is the best way to pull awareness to an issue and put a story in front of the cause. However, young people should be seen as experts and must be compensated for their time and efforts at a livable wage. It is important to empower youth and not exploit their experience and expertise.
- **Clear Cut Vision Lens:** Disappointment is inevitable but transparency helps. Young people should be involved at all levels of the decision-making process. This may look like sharing funding streams characteristics that fund their efforts and being upfront about the scope of work and their power. The NYC YAB discusses budgetary decisions to ensure everyone is on the same page about how funds are distributed and how projects and activities endorsed by the YAB are funded. Being transparent about power dynamics within the YAB and the CoC keeps youth in the room and builds trust and rapport.

- **Professional Development:** Invest in ongoing professional development opportunities for Youth Action Board members. This includes explaining abbreviations, terms, and data information in a way that builds youth understanding of the homeless response system without discrediting or discouraging their lived experience and expertise. Not only does this expand authentic youth collaboration but young people will provide thorough solutions and framework to tackle homelessness.