

ALL ABOUT YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEES

What is a Youth Advisory Committee (YAC)?

A Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) is a group of young people that provides meaningful input into the decision-making process of youth-serving organizations.¹ A YAC gives young people the opportunity to express their views and have their voices heard on topics that are important to them.^{2,3,4}

Why should you have a YAC?

Creating a YAC is an excellent way of promoting and practicing high quality youth engagement. There is overwhelming evidence that suggests the importance of meaningfully engaging young people, and thus developing a YAC has become an essential part of the YWHO Integrated Youth Services (IYS) model. Establishing a YAC can serve two purposes:

1. It is a catalyst for ensuring that young people are meaningfully engaged as co-developers in the planning, execution, and evaluation of all tasks related to YWHO Integrated Youth Services.
2. It serves as an opportunity for young people to build their personal advocacy and leadership abilities within a youth engagement framework that supports positive development and helps with their personal goals.

While there's no checklist or one-size-fits-all approach for establishing and sustaining a YAC, this document will provide you with tips and recommendations to help you along the way. Evidence comes from literature and from lived-experiences of young people that have been involved with YACs. Let's get started!



HOW TO CREATE A YAC

7 STEPS TO LAUNCHING A SUCCESSFUL YAC



1 Get buy-in

Creating a YAC and ultimately strengthening youth engagement in your site requires site-wide buy-in from all staff and leadership including the senior management team and board of directors. It is important for all parties involved with the YAC to be fully supportive. Furthermore, all parties should strive to understand the importance of high quality youth engagement, make a commitment to implement it, and dedicate the appropriate resources required to support it.⁵

2 Identify resources

Start thinking about how your site and those receiving your services, for example youth, service agencies, and other stakeholders, will benefit from having a YAC. Building local site readiness and cultivating deep relationships with youth require at minimum: staff time, a safe space and place to gather, incentives for engagement, and honorarium.^{5,6}

Ensure that your local site has the capacity to provide structured opportunities that support youth development and leadership, not merely participation.⁶

3 Develop learning opportunities

As you get ready to strengthen youth engagement capacity, you will want to ensure that staff and youth understand the principles and philosophy of youth engagement. Additionally, ensure that they have opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills, and that they feel encouraged to do so.⁵

4 Set realistic expectations

In order to set realistic expectations, it is important to understand your staff's current capacity and set parameters around the YAC. Ensure clear communication on what staff are being asked to do, why youth are being engaged, what roles will youth and staff play, what the purpose and goals of the YAC are, which aspects of the initiative can youth and staff influence, and how youth be compensated.⁵

5 Evaluate progress

Ongoing evaluation of YAC activities and progress is a key ingredient to its overall success. It's a way for people to learn and for the committee to flourish.⁹ Throughout the year, youth should be engaged in informal and formal evaluation methods to reflect on their experiences. Current YAC members can evaluate progress through a questionnaire or through hosting a special meeting. They can acknowledge their achievements and make suggestions for improvements.⁶

6 Recruit members

Adolescence is by nature a time of transition, thus sites need to engage in ongoing recruitment and succession planning. This is to ensure that when youth move onto their next challenge, the youth voice isn't lost within the IYS site. Your team should focus on building on existing networks as well as recruiting young people with youth partners.⁵

Successful recruitment entails the following:

1. Promoting diversity and inclusivity: A YAC is meant to be representative of the community it serves in terms of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. It should include representatives from marginalized groups of youth.^{1,7}
2. Considering all barriers: Consider reasons that may prevent someone from getting involved. Possible barriers include but are not limited to language, geography, other commitments, stigma, etc. Think about how you can address these barriers to ensure equal opportunities for all youth.⁵
3. Developing a communication plan: Communication strategies are key for reaching out to different populations, for building buy-in, and for providing youth with information and support they need to engage meaningfully.⁵
4. Planning for sustainability: Developing a succession plan with youth is a proactive way to help them identify their goals and aspirations, as well as to provide them with opportunities to grow. Building the skills and knowledge of young people requires an investment from the IYS site and will not only prepare them for new levels of involvement in your IYS site, but will provide them with life skills that will enhance their ability to actively contribute to the community over time.⁵

7 Create safer spaces

A welcoming environment provides physical and psychological safety. In terms of safety, it is important to distinguish between a place and a space. While the place provides a physical location, the space is created by those who interact in it. A safer space supports behaviors and interactions that are open and accepting, where people can express themselves freely and authentically, and where they can contribute actively without fear of being judged. Creating a safer space requires a collaborative approach between youth and adults.⁵ Here are some tips for creating safer spaces:

- Identify core values to be upheld in the space- Identify values collaboratively to help youth understand what really matters to participants and how individuals in a group are looking to interact with each other.⁵
- Set group norms and expectations-group norms help to ensure positive interactions between group members⁵
- Implement a conflict resolution process- outline steps for handling a conflict or filing a formal complaint. Creating this process with youth and ensuring that they fully understand their rights and responsibilities promotes safety and accountability.⁵
- Adopt a trauma informed lens- learn and understand the widespread impact of trauma, recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma, and actively seek ways to avoid re-traumatization by embedding key trauma principles within the site culture.⁸
- Offer support- support should be available on-site if possible, or on-call at all time. Ensure staff or adult allies supporting youth are offered basic mental health awareness training.⁵

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