Plenary 11: Actionizing Youth Collaboration

Authentic youth collaboration and engagement require action. Putting youth voice and ideas into action is how communities can shape their policies, programs, services, and systems to better meet the needs of all youth, including youth at risk of and experiencing homelessness.

Principles for Success in Authentic Youth Engagement

Youth planners from the 2004 International Learning Exchange identified five essential principles for successful youth engagement. These principles were developed by examining the assets youth contribute to planning and decision-making processes—what they can offer and what others can learn from them. Communities can begin actionizing youth collaboration by making sure these five principles are incorporated from the start of their efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness.
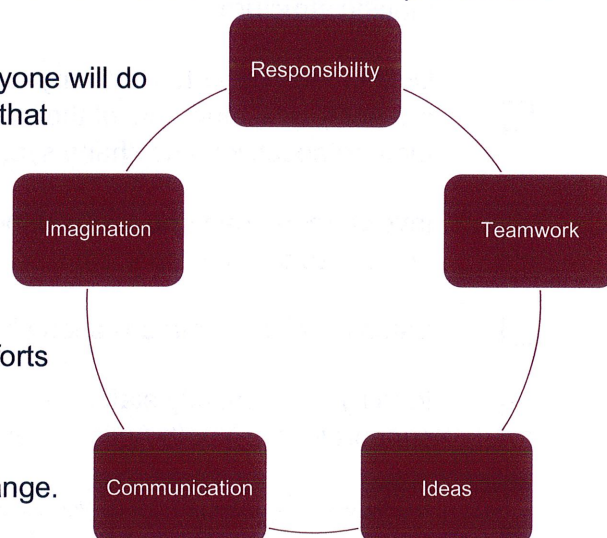
Responsibility: There is an expectation that everyone will do what they say they will do. Youth want assurance that adults will share responsibility with them, and adults look to youth to be active participants. Both youth and adults have a responsibility to speak up when things are getting off track.

Teamwork: Working together to achieve shared goals requires teamwork. It requires combining efforts toward common objectives to share ideas and accomplish results.

Ideas: New ideas are essential for community change. Honoring ideas and creativity is part of the empowerment process.

Communication: Communication allows partners to better understand each other and develop a shared understanding of the vision and goals of the work. Communication involves listening carefully and making sure everyone is heard.

Imagination: By using youth-driven imagination, communities can increase their "aha" experiences—moments of understanding and inspiration.

Assessing the Effectiveness of Youth Action Boards and Other Activities to Involve Youth

Youth should be involved at all levels of system planning for preventing and ending youth homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) developed the following checklist for communities to assess whether they are effectively engaging youth, either through their Youth Action Board or through other efforts to involve youth.

Communities can use this checklist to assess their approach to youth involvement in their coordinated community planning process to prevent and end youth homelessness.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST: DOES YOUR COMMUNITY...
☐ Have a Youth Action Board with defined roles and meaningful objectives, as well as a clearly defined relationship to the youth homelessness system decision-making structure?
☐ Define other opportunities for youth involvement and feedback, so that youth who are not formal members of the Youth Action Board still have opportunities to share their perspectives and shape system decisions?
☐ Involve more than one youth in the youth homelessness system decision-making processes so their input is not compartmentalized or easily dismissed?
☐ Establish clear communication channels between youth and adult participants?
☐ Identify a community staff person to ensure coordination and administrative support for the Youth Action Board?
☐ Ensure a diverse range of youth populations are represented, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, parenting youth, transition-aged youth, etc.?
☐ Have clear incentives for participating youth to compensate them for their time?
☐ Hold meetings at times and places convenient and respectful to the needs of youth?

Youth Involvement and Engagement Assessment Tool

A key component of positive youth development is to make sure youth not only have a quality experience but are also fully engaged as active participants. However, this process takes time. The Youth Involvement and Engagement Assessment Tool allows organizations to assess youth involvement, engagement, and retention. It is suggested that organizations and community-based partnerships assess their programs every 6 months.

Youth Involvement					
Factor	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Youth take a lot of initiative to work on projects.					
Youth are always busy with things to do.					
Youth arrive to meetings/events on time.					
Youth take ownership when responding to specific tasks.					
Youth rely on themselves to make key decisions.					
Youth always share ideas about things that matter to them.					
Youth help one another learn new skills.					
Youth are fully committed to their duties.					
Youth are very excited about their involvement with this project.					
Youth are involved at all levels of program development.					
Youth Engagement (Within the Community)					
Factor	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Youth display a willingness to accept leadership responsibilities in their community.					
Youth have full access to information needed to make decisions.					
Youth express a genuine interest in the community.					

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Youth display a desire to help others in their community.					
Youth display a desire to mentor other youth.					
Youth take part in discussions at community forums/hearings.					
Youth are applying what they learn by getting involved in other community activities.					
Youth take pride in their community.					
Youth seek the advice of adults in the community.					
Youth come up with their own ideas for improving the community.					
Youth are involved in several community-based projects.					
Youth express a sense of belonging toward their community.					
Youth are very concerned about community change.					

Youth Retention

Factor	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Youth are recruiting their peers to join the program.					
Most of the projects are led by youth.					
Youth consult with adults on project activities.					
Staff/volunteers (adults) have the skills to serve as mentors to youth.					
The ideas of this project were generated mostly by youth.					
Most youth have no difficulty in getting to the meetings.					
Adults feel comfortable working with assertive youth.					
Youth make decisions based on their own experiences.					
Some youth have been involved in this project for 1 year or more.					

As older youth leave the program, they are replaced by their younger peers.					
Youth see this experience as a chance to socialize with friends.					
Youth choose to work on this project instead of other activities (playing sports, watching TV).					
Youth are routinely recognized for their accomplishments.					
Youth make efforts to attend every meeting.					
Most youth return to this program year after year.					
Youth are passionate about the issues addressed through this project.					
Youth recognize their strengths in working as a member of the team.					
Youth feel challenged to do their best.					

Youth Involvement

High Youth Involvement: Youth demonstrate high levels of active participation. They are willing to work with others while also taking on leadership roles. They feel a sense of belonging and are therefore at ease in sharing their ideas, while welcoming the opinions of others. At high levels of involvement, youth have full access to details that assist in their social, intellectual, and leadership development. Programs with high involvement are not controlled by adults but foster a youth-led approach, allowing young people to take ownership. Youth are intrinsically motivated to embrace the responsibilities of projects and take advantage of the opportunity to have their ideas heard, considered, and implemented.

Steps to improve youth involvement:

- Recruit youth who are experienced leaders and pair them with those who are younger and less experienced.

- Make sure youth are afforded opportunities for independence. Give them chances to make decisions and express their opinions.

- Whenever possible, allow youth to decide what project they want to implement. When they have ownership, their commitment levels increase.

- Have adult support in place to assist when it is solicited. Despite their independence, youth still want help from adults when needed.

Youth Engagement

High Youth Engagement: Youth engagement refers to youth contributing to their own development by applying learned life skills and being afforded the chance to function as effective decision-makers. Youth have the confidence to take on leadership roles and the competence to make informed decisions. Therefore, they seek out opportunities to participate in youth-driven programs and initiatives. Youth are also applying their skills by getting involved in other organizations, participating in civic affairs, and serving on boards and councils.

Steps to improve youth engagement:

- Take time during program meetings to discuss issues affecting the community. Both youth and adults should bring topics to the meeting.

- Invite community leaders to come and speak to youth about issues in the community.

- Let youth decide if they want to develop action plans to address any specific concerns. This allows youth to take ownership from the very beginning. If they are not passionate about an issue, their willingness to become engaged may decrease.

- Youth-adult partnerships are very useful in promoting youth engagement. A partnership can provide youth with several adult mentors who may have a better understanding of the community and can impart this wisdom to youth. On the other hand, youth can provide their expertise on those issues that are important to them and their peers. Also, social change can be a daunting process for those new to community organizing. Partnership can balance the responsibilities between youth and adults as they strive to make a difference.

- In some cases, youth may not be ready to take on issues on a broader scale. If so, spend more time developing their leadership and social skills through involvement to equip them for civic engagement.

Youth Retention

High Youth Retention: Success in retaining youth in programs is demonstrated by youth consistently returning to the program on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis. It should be clear that they are making a choice to participate when they have other options to choose. Key factors fostering retention include, but are not limited to:

- Caring, supportive adults;

- Opportunities for youth to connect/socialize with peers;

- Recognition of youth for their efforts;

- Opportunities for youth to make decisions;

- Youth enjoyment of the challenge of serving and being recognized as community decision-makers;

- Genuine youth interest in the issues being addressed; and

- As older youth leave the program due to graduation, jobs, etc., other youth are encouraged to join the team to sustain efforts.

Steps to improve youth retention may include:

- Allowing time for socializing among peers. Youth need to recognize the program as a venue to have fun. The news will spread quickly when a group of youth can tell others about opportunities that build confidence while having a good time.

- Giving youth a chance to get to know adults and form trusting relationships with them. Bonding time can occur during meetings or other scheduled events.

- Being sure youth are involved from beginning to end. This contributes to feeling valued.

- Being assertive in recruiting younger participants who can gain experience while being mentored by older peers.

- Using the expertise of adult volunteers by allowing them to work with youth to help create and enhance programs that are more appealing.

- Recognizing youth for their efforts on a regular basis, both formally and informally.

Youth-Adult Partnership Rubric (Y-AP Rubric)

With support from an Edmund A. Stanley, Jr., research grant from the Robert Bowne Foundation, researchers from Michigan State University's (MSU's) Office of University Outreach and Engagement and directors from the Neutral Zone, a community-based center, formed a project team to co-develop the Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) rubric. The rubric addresses four key dimensions of youth-adult partnerships: authentic decision-making, natural mentors, reciprocity, and community connectedness.

The rubric can be used to serve the following purposes:

1. To formalize the concepts of youth-adult partnership in youth settings;
2. To be used as a low-stake peer/self-assessment tool for strengthening youth-adult partnership practices; and
3. To be used as a formative or summative evaluation tool for assessing the structures and processes of youth-adult partnership in youth settings.

This assessment tool is publicly available at https://cerc.msu.edu/yaprubric and includes detailed instructions for observation and rating of youth-adult partnerships in action, tools to capture context information (such as numbers of youth and adults in attendance) during observation, and a fillable version of the rubric.

Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) Rubric

Rating scale: The rating scale for the Y-AP rubric is 1 (low) - 5 (high), with specific descriptions provided for scores 1, 3, and 5.

Dimension 1: Authentic Decision-making—Youth are involved in meaningful decision-making.			
Factor	**Rating 1 Example**	**Rating 3 Example**	**Rating 5 Example**
1.1 Youth's voices are shared and valued.	Adults dominate group discussions. Youth voice is rarely solicited or valued.	Adults frequently solicit input from youth, but new perspectives are rarely incorporated or extended upon.	Adults intentionally support youth voice; new perspectives are as valued as past experiences.
1.2 Youth participate in authentic decision-making.	Youth participate in little or no decision-making. Decisions are mainly made by adults.	Youth participate in some decision-making, but not on important items. Youth tend to seek adults' approval for decisions or next steps.	Youth participate in all decision-making, including low- or high-stake items.
1.3 Youth have key leadership roles or responsibilities.	Youth have minimal leadership roles and responsibilities. Adults are the leaders of the group.	Youth have some leadership roles and responsibilities, but they are low-stake.	Youth take on key leadership roles and responsibilities that further develop their skills and networks.

Factor	Rating 1 Example	Rating 3 Example	Rating 5 Example
1.4 All youth participate fully in the conversation.	A few youth dominate the conversation and act as representing the whole group. There is little to no intention in trying to balance out unequal power among youth.	A few youth dominate the conversation. There is some intention in trying to balance out unequal power among youth, but it often fails.	Youth participation is even. Youth may decline the opportunity to speak up based on their own comfort level, but their full participation is present.
1.5 The organization's culture or by-laws supports youth governance.	Youth have no explicit roles beyond being a participant in the organization.	Youth can take on certain leadership roles in program activities but not for the whole organization's governance.	Youth are part of the whole organization 's governance, as demonstrated by explicit roles they have across the organization.

DIMENSION 2: Natural Mentors—Adults intentionally support relationships with youth to help them develop.

Factor	Rating 1 Example	Rating 3 Example	Rating 5 Example
2.1 Adults support youth with appropriate boundaries.	Adults do not provide enough support for youth.	Adults support youth but fail to maintain appropriate boundaries.	Adults support youth with appropriate boundaries.
2.2 Adults are intentional in using tasks to enhance youths' experiences and skills.	Youth take on activities offering limited opportunities to strengthen or develop new experiences and skills. Adults do not explicitly encourage them to take on more challenging tasks.	Youth take on activities that could be challenging and are provided with opportunities to strengthen or develop new experiences and skills. However, no further training or preparation is provided to prepare them for success.	Youth take on activities that could be challenging and are provided with opportunities to strengthen or develop new experiences and skills. Adults foresee potential challenges and prepare youth for success.
2.3 Adults can work with youth to maintain an organized, inclusive, and collaborative environment for all.	Chaos, disorganization, or dysfunction is frequently present in youth activities.	Sometimes the activity seems chaotic, disorganized, or dysfunctional, but there is some support for collaboration and getting tasks accomplished.	Adults support an organized, inclusive, and collaborative environment that helps youth work to meet their goals.

2.4 Adults are resourceful and intentional in enhancing youths' social capital.	Adults do not mention any resources or networks that could benefit youth.	Adults mention resources or networks that could be beneficial to youth but lack tangible action.	Adults provide youth with specific contacts or information that could enhance their resources or networks.
2.5 Adults are active listeners; youth reflect and develop their own ideas.	Adults do most of the talking. Youth are constantly interrupted or have limited opportunity to share and develop their ideas.	Adults are intentional in letting youth talk but still end up doing most of the talking rather than being an active listener.	Adults act as active listeners by offering encouragement, repeating back what youth are saying, and waiting for them to further develop their thoughts. Adults encourage youth to reflect and develop their own ideas.
2.6 Adults help youth think through complex issues and respect whatever conclusions youth reach.	Adults do not help youth think through complex issues, or even if they do, they try to persuade them what they think would be best for them to do.	Adults help youth think through the complexity of issues. Sometimes they try to persuade youth what they think would be best for them to do; other times they encourage youth to reach their own conclusions.	Adults help youth think through the complexity of issues and make clear that they will respect whatever conclusions youth reach.
2.7 Adults help youth think about goals and possibilities for the future, identifying steps to achieve them.	Adults do not help youth think about goals or opportunities for the future.	Adults help youth think about goals and possibilities for the future. Yet, discussion is minimal, and there are no clear tangible steps to achieve these goals.	Adults help youth think about goals and possibilities for the future. Discussions include clear tangible steps to achieve these goals.
2.8 Adults celebrate youths' progress, strengths and successes.	Adults do not mention any progress, strengths, or successes youth have achieved.	Adults mention some progress, strengths, or successes youth have achieved, but youth do not have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences.	Adults mention some progress, strengths, or successes youth have achieved. Youth are encouraged to reflect on their experiences.

DIMENSION 3: Reciprocity—Youth and adults work together as partners.

Factor	Rating 1 Example	Rating 3 Example	Rating 5 Example
3.1 Youth and adults create a mutual agenda.	The agenda is largely created by adults.	The agenda is created by adults with minimal youth input.	The agenda is co-created by youth and adults.
3.2 Youth and adults exchange ideas as supportive peers.	Youth and adults rarely draw on each other's ideas.	Youth and adults sometimes draw on each other's ideas, but they don't genuinely integrate these ideas together.	Youth and adults routinely seek out one another's opinion and integrate their ideas.
3.3 Youth and adults work collaboratively as supportive peers.	Youth and adults tend to work separately from one another.	Youth and adults occasionally perform tasks involving collaboration.	Youth and adults routinely perform tasks involving collaboration.
3.4 Youth and adults are co-learning partners.	Adults assume their role is to answer questions for youth or teach them how to do their tasks.	Adults encourage youth to share some knowledge but still think they know better or it's their role to teach youth how to do their tasks.	Adults do not assume they have all the answers and are willing to learn from youth.

DIMENSION 4: Community Connectedness—Youth are engaged in communities.

Factor	Rating 1 Example	Rating 3 Example	Rating 5 Example
4.1 Youth develop a sense of community through program involvement.	There is little to no opportunity for youth to develop ongoing relationships and connections with each other.	There are some opportunities for youth to develop ongoing relationships with each other, but youth do not have a sense of group membership.	Youth identify themselves as an active member of the group or the overall program.
4.2 Youth are active contributors to the community.	Youth participate in activities beneficial to themselves.	Youth participate in activities beneficial to themselves and support the program.	Youth participate in activities supporting themselves, the program, and the external community.
4.3 Youth gain essential social capital through program involvement.	The activities provide no opportunities for youth to engage in communities outside of the organization.	The activities provide youth with minimal opportunities to engage in communities outside of the organization.	The activities provide youth with meaningful opportunities to engage in communities outside of the organization.

Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) Rubric: Scoring

Dimension 1: Authentic Decision-making—Youth are involved in meaningful decision-making.

Factor	Score (1 to 5)
1.1 Youth's voices are shared and valued.	_____
1.2 Youth participate in authentic decision-making.	_____
1.3 Youth have key leadership roles or responsibilities.	_____
1.4 All youth fully participate in the conversation.	_____
1.5 The organization's culture or by-laws supports youth governance.	_____

Dimension 2: Natural Mentors—Adults intentionally support relationships with youth to help them develop.

Factor	Score (1 to 5)
2.1 Adults support youth with appropriate boundaries.	_____
2.2 Adults are intentional in using tasks to enhance youths' experiences and skills.	_____
2.3 Adults can work with youth to maintain an organized, inclusive, and collaborative environment for all.	_____
2.4 Adults are resourceful and intentional in enhancing youth's social capital.	_____
2.5 Adults are active listeners; youth reflect and develop their own ideas.	_____
2.6 Adults help youth think through complex issues and respect whatever conclusions they reach.	_____
2.7 Adults help youth think about goals and possibilities for the future, identifying steps to achieve them.	_____
2.8 Adults celebrate youths' progress, strength, or success.	_____

Dimension 3: Reciprocity—Youth and adults work together as partners.

Factor	Score (1 to 5)
3.1 Youth and adults create a mutual agenda.	_____
3.2 Youth and adults exchange ideas as supportive peers.	
3.3 Youth and adults work collaboratively as supportive peers.	_____
3.4 Youth and adults are co-learning partners.	_____

Dimension 4: Community Connectedness—Youth are engaged in communities.

Factor	Score (1 to 5)
4.1 Youth develop a sense of community through program involvement.	_____
4.2 Youth are active contributors to the community.	_____
4.3 Youth gain essential social capital through program involvement.	_____

Total (The average of the four-dimension scores/highest % score possible (5) x 100%)	_____%

Strategies and Tools for Engaging Youth in Changing Communities

The Annie E. Casey Foundation developed a "toolbox" comprised of six different strategies identified by international youth and adult partners for successfully engaging youth in community change. These strategies are:

1. Putting youth at the heart,
2. Building positive youth-adult relationships,
3. Synchronizing youth and adult agendas,
4. Recruiting and retaining young people,
5. Supporting youth organizational development, and
6. Developing support systems for youth engagement.

Youth and adults have contributed examples, activities, tools, and lessons learned from their communities and nations to support new communities while putting these strategies into action.

Putting Youth at the Heart—No tokenism is present.

To involve youth in meaningful ways, communities must put them at the center of their efforts. The voices of youth must be heard even when they are not saying what others want to hear and when their opinions are unexpected, painful to hear, or difficult to understand. Youth should be empowered to influence decisions affecting them and in ways meaningful to them.

Putting youth at the heart of the work also acknowledges youth as valuable community partners with important information and skills to contribute. This recognition should include all youth, regardless of their background, culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, family income, or other characteristics.

Although putting youth at the heart does not guarantee youth will get what they want, people and organizations must be prepared to act differently in response to their concerns. Youth engagement requires that individuals and organizations be prepared to act differently—to devote adequate time and to take real risks.

TOOLS AND ACTIVITIES: PUTTING YOUTH AT THE HEART

Forums for Hearing Young People's Views	Youth summits and other community gatherings provide opportunities for young people to voice their views, opinions, and perspectives. These convenings are venues for self-expression and can feature music, dance, spoken word, and other performances or creative activities. In initiating youth engagement activities, community-wide events can also renew energy among participants, reach additional youth, and provide an opportunity to report on work in progress.

Youth and Young Adults at the Decision-making Table	To put youth at the heart of the work, there is no substitute for having them fully participate in allocating resources, developing policies, and implementing strategies.
Youth Making Decisions about Use of Money	Some communities are allocating relatively small grants for youth to determine how to improve the lives of youth and other residents. While they are not a substitute for influencing overall spending for youth, the small grants go a long way toward engaging young people in decisions about improving community conditions.
A Place of Their Own	Youth value a place they can call their own where they can spend time with friends, meet new people, and pursue activities and interests. This place may have even more significance if it is a space youth claim for themselves and reflects their own creativity and energy.

Strong Youth-Adult Relationships

The relationships adults and youth build together are at the crux of improvements in youth outcomes. Neither youth nor adults can improve the lives of young people or make systems-level change in their communities by acting alone. For most youth and adults, working together as partners in community decision-making is a new arrangement requiring each individual to overcome deeply ingrained habits, attitudes, and behaviors.

TOOLS AND ACTIVITIES: STRONG YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS	
Skill-building Activities	Training and other skill-building sessions can help level the playing field between youth and adult partners and build positive relationships. Participating together may help build trust, prevent conflict, strengthen individuals' capacities, and develop effective group practices.
Reaching Consensus: Principles and Expectations for Working Together	Youth and adults should be clear about how they want to work together and what they expect of each other within the partnership. Brainstorming, sharing perspectives about goals and objectives, and developing agreed upon guidelines or expectations can help ensure shared understanding. Such agreements provide a guidepost participants can check periodically to be sure they remain on track or to discuss changes they want to make as new learning occurs.
The Promise and Potential of Mentoring	Mentoring is one form of relationship providing support, friendship, and growth. Youth engaged in community change often consider the adults who support their efforts to be mentors. It may be possible to build on existing

models and experiences to rethink mentoring as a strategy for community change, including models for adult decision-makers to work closely with emerging youth leaders.

Synchronizing Youth and Adult Agendas

An important part of achieving community change is aligning the priorities identified by youth with the issues adults believe are most important. Often, communities find that youth and adults alike want many of the same outcomes. This provides a strong basis for negotiation and developing win-win approaches to improve the community.

TOOLS AND ACTIVITIES: SYNCHRONIZING YOUTH AND ADULT AGENDAS	
Youth-led Community Research	Youth are becoming a new force in community research to collect the facts, figures, and opinions they need to improve their communities and their own lives. In community efforts to prevent and end homelessness, this may include youth engagement in data collection and methodology for youth Point-In-Time counts, conducting youth-led focus groups on housing and services and participating in data-focused work groups.
Learning Exchanges: Sharing Good Ideas	Within their communities, youth groups and summits bring young people together to share experiences and views. Regional, national, and international gatherings such as conferences help youth exchange ideas and learn new strategies. Web-based forums, podcasts, and email listservs are other vehicles for learning and sharing their experiences.
Negotiating Win-Win Solutions	Data is critical for developing strategies that will achieve the desired results and be acceptable to both youth and adults. The information becomes a tool for synchronizing youth and adult agendas. It allows young people to document their needs, interests, and goals within the broader arena of community-wide interests. Concrete information helps identify strategies that might work and makes a convincing case to community decision-makers.

Recruiting and Retaining Youth Participants in Community Decision-Making

Recruiting and retaining youth participants requires a strong plan with specific strategies and tools, as well as flexibility and ability to change. Community initiatives that put youth at the heart of their work and dedicate time and effort to building positive adult-youth relationships will find it easier to recruit youth to participate in the work. When youth are making decisions about issues that interest them and can see outcomes, they are likely to stay involved.

TOOLS AND ACTIVITIES: RECRUITING AND RETAINING YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

Doors to Fit Every Young Person	The best way to recruit youth partners is to ask them what will work. It is important to provide multiple opportunities and ways for people to get involved.
Opportunities to Learn What Young People Want to Know	Many youths are attracted by opportunities to learn new skills and broaden their experience in other ways. Providing extended access to resources helping youth to engage in and master their interests keeps them engaged.
Youth Popular Culture as the Hook	Youth culture takes different shapes in different places and can be a powerful tool for engaging youth. Examples include music, dance, poetry, the spoken word, and visual arts.
Room to Grow	The roles and activities appealing to youth may change as they grow, as their situations change and they develop new interests and abilities. When youth get involved, many develop an interest in increasing levels of responsibility and leadership. They need opportunities to develop new roles and skills.

GUIDELINES FOR MAKING YOUTH PARTICIPATION ACCESSIBLE

☐ **Welcoming and Convenient Locations.** Convenient locations may be places where youth gather. Schools are a site for consideration, although some youth may not see school as a welcoming place, and others may want a change of scene for their involvement in community activities.

☐ **Transportation.** Holding activities in places where youth can walk or bike to also helps make participation easy. When this is not possible, providing access to public transportation can facilitate youth involvement.

☐ **Timing.** Scheduling evening or weekend activities may avoid conflicts with school and other obligations. Some communities suggest negotiating with schools when scheduling large, community-wide meetings.

☐ **Meeting and Event Format.** Meetings and events should be formatted to respond to how youth learn and share information. Youth can set guidelines for conducting activities, such as creating icebreakers, determining the seminar structure, and selecting the discussion topics.

☐ **Shared Roles and Responsibilities.** Youth may be interested in rotating or sharing roles and responsibilities, such as planning agendas, chairing meetings, recording proceedings, or other functions they identify.

- ☐ **Accessible language.** Terms and jargon only adults or professionals understand can alienate youth from the discussion. In addition, all communication needs to be accessible and friendly to individuals of all cultural backgrounds and languages within the community.

- ☐ **Refreshments.** Many young people report that snacks, food, and drinks help people relax, break boundaries, and avoid the distraction of hunger.

- ☐ **Personal expression.** Freedom of expression, especially in a fun, participatory, creative environment, can help engage youth.

Supporting Youth Organizational Development

An important consideration for organizations pursuing authentic youth engagement is to determine whether they support the values and outcomes important to youth. Organizational decision-making processes, policies, and operating procedures should support youth in making decisions affecting them. Organizational support can take many forms. The key is to work in partnership with youth to create a blueprint for such organizational support and development.

TOOLS AND ACTIVITIES: SUPPORTING YOUTH ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ideas and Action Over Formal Organization	The key structure supporting youth participation is often a network where they find mutual respect and support — not a formal organization.
Organizational Strength and Capacity	In some situations, a formal organization may be essential for developing the capacity needed to achieve youth goals. An organizational home can increase visibility within the community, provide a base for implementing results-focused strategies, and give youth an important sense of belonging. An effective organization can also help with fundraising and sustaining efforts over time.
Meaningful Compensation	Youth are more engaged and stay involved in community efforts if their time and expertise is respected, which includes providing meaningful compensation for their participation.
Youth Organizational and Management Decisions	Involving youth in selecting staff and determining staff roles and responsibilities helps to put them at the heart of organizations intending to support youth engagement, serve youth, or strengthen their communities. Youth involvement in volunteer recruitment panels and staff interview panels may help to ensure that job candidates recognize the role of youth and the organizational priorities.

YOUTH ACTION BOARDS, COUNCILS, AND WORK GROUPS: ORGANIZATIONAL GUIDELINES TO CONSIDER

☐ **Put youth in charge of setting the agenda.** Encourage youth to choose the issues, concerns, and interests on which they would like to focus. They may need tools and resources to identify the goals they want to achieve, but the goals should be owned by the community's youth.

☐ **Ask youth to design the action board, council, or work group.** Rather than imposing an adult model or design on youth, ask them how the organizational body should operate, including the identification of the purpose, roles, and responsibilities. Youth are likely to develop creative models, try things adults would not attempt, and learn firsthand what works and what does not.

☐ **Provide tools and mechanisms for engaging all young people.** Regardless of the design and the focus, specific steps must be taken to ensure all youth have a voice.

Building Support Systems for Youth Decision-Making

Some communities are developing policy frameworks to support youth consultation and safeguard the rights of young people to participate in decisions affecting them. With or without this framework, youth and their adult champions are working to impact the policies and services impacting them. They are learning about the supports required for change and how to ensure effective supports are in place.

TOOLS AND ACTIVITIES: BUILDING SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR YOUTH DECISION-MAKING

Continuous Leadership and Community Development	Routinely offered leadership training and skill development can boost the capacity of individual young people and youth participation.
Collaborative Community Partnerships	Achieving results to prevent and end homelessness requires many partners working together. In collaboration, community organizations that touch the lives of youth in any way can overcome their isolation and improve their effectiveness. By sharing expertise and perspectives, collaborative networks enhance staff capacity.

Networks of Support Implanted in the Community

Systems of support may already be firmly established within the community structure. These networks are often deeply entrenched in daily life and widely extended beyond a single program or agency. They have ongoing capacity to:

- Coach and support all youth to find their voices and achieve their goals;

- Encourage, assist, and advocate for young people to be an ongoing and effective force in community decision-making;

- Nurture strong, ongoing adult-youth relationships; and

- Build and expand collaborative partnerships to form a strong network of policies, practices, and resources for youth engagement.

Undoing Adultism

The National Youth Forum on Homelessness (NYFH) and the True Colors Fund developed a Youth Collaboration Toolkit to help ensure that young people are authentically engaged while collaborating with the affirming adults in their lives. As communities work to put youth collaboration into action, it is important they work with adult partners to confront adultism and create truly collaborative spaces for youth-adult partnerships to develop.

The following activities can be done independently or used to facilitate a guided discussion with adult partners to confront and undo adultist behaviors.

Activity Instructions

Read each scenario one at a time. After each scenario, ask the following questions:

- What about this scenario? Is it adultist?
- If you were a young person, how might this interaction make you feel?
- How might you reframe this scenario?

If necessary, refer to the suggested reframe as an example.

ACTIVITY: UNDOING ADULTISM		
Scenario	**Suggested Reframe**	**Explanation**
Kasey meets with her case manager and divulges that her best friend passed away of an overdose the night before. Her case manager tells her, "I know just how you feel."	Kasey meets with her case manager and divulges that her best friend passed away of an overdose the night before. Instead of responding or attempting to sympathize or empathize, her case manager actively listens and provides insight when asked.	Young people want to feel heard. Sometimes, just listening is best.
Jose delivers a powerful testimonial at a Youth Action Board meeting. Afterwards, he is greeted by a caseworker who tells him, "I didn't know you were so smart."	Jose delivers a powerful testimonial at a Youth Action Board meeting. Afterwards, he is greeted by a caseworker who tells him, "Thank you so much for sharing your experience and expertise."	Underestimating a young person's capabilities can be dismissive and belittling.

After being released from jail, Chris stops by the drop-in center to shower and eat. The first case manager she sees says, "I told you that you'd end up in jail." Chris feels embarrassed and leaves.	After being released from jail, Chris stops by the drop-in center to shower and eat. The first case manager she sees greets her with a smile, asks if she wants to talk, and invites her into a separate office. He asks Chris to tell him what happened and how she is doing, and tells her that she was missed while she was away. Chris stays, because she feels respected and understood, even though she made a mistake.	Instead of shaming young people, invite them to talk through mistakes and lessons learned. In these conversations, it is important to do more listening than talking.
After reviewing his monthly budget with his case manager, Frank learns he has overspent for the month. His case manager tells him, "You need help managing your money."	After reviewing his monthly budget with his case manager, Frank learns he has overspent for the month. Frank's case manager asks him if he would like assistance managing his finances.	Instead of assuming young people are unable to handle situations on their own, ask them if they would like assistance.
Tre notices that Keisha is not her usual self when she walks through the doors of the drop-in center. The first thing he says is, "I know something's wrong. Let's talk about it."	Tre notices that Keisha is not her usual self when she walks through the doors of the drop-in center. He greets her with a smile and asks, "How are you?" As they talk, Tre encourages Keisha to focus on what is going well in her life.	Focusing on the negativity could further victimize young people. Instead, invite them to think about things they can celebrate.
Terrance walks into a group counseling session with bloodshot eyes and has a hard time writing his name on the sign-in sheet. Assuming he is under the influence, the group leader says, "You can't participate in group while you're high."	Terrance walks into a group counseling session with bloodshot eyes and has a hard time writing his name on the sign-in sheet. The group leader greets him and asks, "How is your day going?"	If you want to know what's going on with a young person, ask first. Use open-ended questions to get as much information as possible instead of making assumptions. Then, if necessary, ask more directly.

A group of youth with lived experience of homelessness has been assembled to provide feedback on how to improve services in their community. They are asked to only speak about ways to improve basic direct services and not how to address systemic issues within the services within their community.	A group of youth with lived experience of homelessness is invited to sit down with service providers and provide feedback on how to improve overall services in their community. They are viewed as equal stakeholders and their input is valued equally.	Value youth as equal stakeholders in the decision-making process.
Mrs. Dorsey notices that Jacob has started smoking cigarettes. Believing this behavior is unhealthy for him, she tells him, "You need to stop smoking before you die of lung cancer."	Mrs. Dorsey notices that Jacob has started smoking cigarettes. She believes this is unhealthy for him and recognizes that he is responsible for his own choices. Instead of judging or scolding him, she works to understand why Jacob likes smoking cigarettes and offers a list of healthier alternatives providing similar benefits for Jacob to consider.	Rather than telling young people what they should or need to do, assess what option they have considered and talk through these options together.
Jordan has a new girlfriend and is convinced she is the girl of his dreams. They confide in their mentor, telling him they think they're in love. Their mentor laughs and says, "You are too young to know what love is."	Jordan has a new girlfriend and is convinced she is the girl of his dreams. They confide in their mentor, telling him they think they're in love. Their mentor congratulates them.	Age is not the same as expertise. When youth share information about their lives with you, take them seriously.
Mr. Dave is helping Jamie apply to colleges. Jamie is undecided about which school to attend. Mr. Dave knows Jamie is very good at math and says they should attend Texas Tech because of its world-renowned math program.	Mr. Dave is helping Jamie apply to colleges. He asks Jamie what they would like to major in, where they would like to live, and if they have any schools in mind. Together, they research a list of schools fitting Jamie's interest. When asked, Mr. Dave provides feedback and insight.	Instead of suggesting what is best for young people, encourage them to consider all available options and invite them to make their own choices.

- **Youth Collaboration Toolkit**: This 2017 toolkit was developed through a partnership between the National Youth Forum on Homelessness (NYFH) and the True Colors Fund to help ensure that young people are authentically engaged while collaborating with the affirming adults in their lives.

- **Ending Youth Homelessness Guidebook Series: System Planning**: This guidebook by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides strategies for developing a youth homelessness system and leadership, including approaches to youth involvement.

- **Measuring and Understanding Authentic Youth Engagement: The Youth-Adult Partnership Rubric**: This 2016 article provides information on youth-adult partnerships and the development of the Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) rubric.

- **Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) Rubric**: Publicly available, this fillable version of the Y-AP rubric was developed by the Michigan State University Community Evaluation and Research Collaborative in partnership with the Neutral Zone, Ann Arbor's teen center. The Y-AP rubric is an assessment tool for professional development and program evaluation in youth settings.

- **Youth Involvement and Engagement Assessment Tool**: This online assessment tool can assist organizations and community partnerships in determining how they involve youth in programs, whether youth are becoming more engaged in the community, and if certain strategies are helping to retain youth.

- **Engaging Youth in Community Decision Making**: This 2007 toolkit, which is by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, offers strategies to foster the active engagement of youth and young adults in community decision-making, including activities and tools to support youth engagement and participation.