

# Topic Spotlight

Through the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP), communities around the country are creating Youth Action Boards (YABs) that bring youth voice to the forefront of their YHDP planning processes.

YAB members are youth who have experienced homelessness and housing instability while under the age of 25. While many communities have yet to create one, YABs can now be found throughout the country. But no matter where they are in the YAB process, most communities making a coordinated effort to end youth homelessness are seeking best practices for fully incorporating youth and young adult leadership.

To help meet this need, in the fall of 2019, we interviewed YABs from a range of communities about different aspects of their operations. From the results, we have created a collection of [Community Fact Sheets](#) and a series of Topic Spotlights that offer insights on key elements of YAB implementation.

## Levels of Participation

To promote growth and new leadership, agendas and goals should allow for all levels of involvement. YABs typically develop three tiers of participation/leadership:

- **A fluid base of members:** These are the people who ebb and flow. Sometimes they come once, and you never see them again.
- **Consistent Participation:** Members who consistently show up and participate in meetings, but don't have an interest in taking on additional opportunities or leadership.

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This Topic Spotlight is part of a series compiled from the responses of seven community YABs surveyed by TAC with the help of consultant Lauren Leonardis: Those communities are Sacramento (CA), Columbus (OH), Boston (MA), Vermont Balance of State, King County (WA), Austin (TX), and Anchorage (AK). Thank you to each of these communities who so generously gave their time to this survey for the benefit of YABs across the country.

- **Core Leadership & Youth Facilitators:** Members who seek leadership and additional responsibilities. Some YABs call them "core members," some hire these youth as facilitators, and some have created executive boards within their YAB.

## Who Facilitates? Every Model Has its Ups and Downs

Like any board, Youth Action Boards (YABs) require some leadership to keep the group's efforts to end

# The Gab on YABs

**STRUCTURE: DECISION-MAKING, FACILITATION, & YOUTH LEADERSHIP**

**Consensus-based decision making builds trust in the process and creates space for ownership and buy-in.**

youth homelessness moving ahead. There are many ways to structure the team that leads the work. For YABs hosted by a local youthserving agency, the job of facilitation is often built into a staff member's position. It could also be done by a consultant, or some members of the YAB itself may also be qualified to take on these paid roles.

Youth leadership is an essential component of YABs. It's also true that sometimes, young adults need support from their older adult partners to organize YAB meetings. These adults should help youth leaders to take on increasing responsibility, investing in their professional development and eventually handing over additional power and decision-making ability to them. Youth should have the ability to handle everything from creating the agendas to making the YAB's budget decisions.

## Paid Roles in Supporting Youth Action Boards

### Youth-Serving Agency Staff

### Consultants

### Youth with Lived Experience

#### Pros

- ✓ Staff are already on hand.
- ✓ Youth may already have trusting relationships with staff.
- ✓ Consultants may have more freedom in how they address issues, helping them to build trust with youth.
- ✓ Youth and young adults with lived experience know best what is needed to change the system, and are able to connect to other YAB members.

#### Cons

- ✗ When agency staff facilitates, youth sometimes aren't as open to sharing their thoughts, for fear of consequences.
- ✗ Staff have to work within the constraints of their organization, which can impede radical but potentially necessary system changes proposed by the YAB.
- ✗ Payment structure; consultants will need to consider taxes if receiving a 1099.
- ✗ Consultants may lack full access to meeting space, supplies, and other resources the YAB needs.
- ✗ Youth may need older adult support as they learn the skills of facilitation.
- ✗ Reliable access to internet, transportation, and other tools may be a challenge for youth, especially those currently experiencing homelessness or housing instability.

## Making Decisions within the YAB

The YABs we surveyed reported that consensus was the most effective way they had found to reach a decision among YAB members. Consensus-based decision making — in which all participants, not just a majority, must agree — builds trust in the process and creates space for ownership and buy-in.

However, we also learned that the consensus decision-making model sometimes proves challenging for larger YABs with more fluid membership. A unique challenge for YABs (unlike other more consistent boards and committees) is to include

the voices of both brand new, and more experienced YAB members. To ensure that decisions are fully informed, one of the YABs we surveyed requires members to attend two or three meetings before they get a counted vote. Another approach is to create an executive board that receives feedback from the larger group and is empowered to make decisions on behalf of the full YAB. It is important that YAB members themselves create the structure for their decision-making process, rather than older adults who may have been involved with the creation of the YAB.

## Making Decisions with Partners

Creating a decision-making process with local partners helps to continually infuse youth voice into efforts to end youth homelessness. Partnering with local agencies also helps to build trust and promote change for youth and young adults. However, it does take time for two or more entities to fully incorporate each other into a decision-making process — so whenever both YAB and partner

input are required, it is important to adapt the project timeline accordingly. Many YABs revisit their overall structure, including decision-making processes and leadership roles, annually or whenever a large turnover in membership occurs. As your YAB evolves and expands, allow room for changes to be made in the structure to best suit your current YAB membership. ■

