

Youth Collaboration:

Tools and Tips from Youth SAG Members

Introduction

Youth voice, especially that of individuals with lived expertise in the justice system, is critical to meaningful system improvement. Development of policies happens best when agencies involve those who are directly impacted. This collaboration has been a central tenet of juvenile justice work for more than 40 years. Since its enactment in 1974, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) has required that one-fifth of each State Advisory Group¹ (SAG)'s members join before they reach the age of 24.

Recruiting and retaining youth members can be challenging though. In a 2016 survey of State Advisory Groups, one-third of respondents said they were actively looking for better ways to collaborate with youth. This report aims to help SAGs identify ways they can deepen their partnerships with youth members, moving beyond recruitment and into true collaboration with youth.² Based on recommendations from current Youth SAG members from across the country, this report presents advice and recommendations from youth on how SAGs can make their work youth-led.

Methodology

To gather data, current youth SAG members were asked to complete a 23-question online survey about their experiences on their SAG. Members from 13 states completed the survey.

In addition to the survey, the Coalition for Juvenile Justice conducted listening sessions with SAG youth members in Colorado and Washington State. These states were selected due to their high level of youth collaboration. Eight of the Washington youth



members who participated in the listening session were incarcerated at the time and attended via WebX chat. The Colorado listening session included four of the state's Emerging Leaders Committee (ELC) members.

Spotlight on Washington State: Interview with Evelyn Maddox, Current Youth Committee Chair

Washington's SAG currently has 11 youth members, all of whom regularly attend and actively participate in meetings. Many of the youth SAG members have lived experiences with the juvenile justice system, and several members are currently incarcerated. Members were recruited from all three of Washington's juvenile detention centers: Green Hill School, Naselle Youth Camp, and Echo Glen Children's Center. To ensure youth members who are currently incarcerated are able to attend all meetings, the Washington SAG received approval to hold webcam sessions within

rehabilitation facilities. To attain approval, Evelyn Maddox, appointed Chair of the Youth Committee and Youth Liaison at Office of Behavioral Health and Prevention, reached out to the Assistant Secretary of Juvenile Rehabilitation, who granted her request. Evelyn has years of experience as a direct service provider, and recruited many of the current Washington SAG youth members from her contacts at organizations and facilities throughout the state. Evelyn had the following insights to share:

How often does your state's youth committee meet?

Our youth committee meets once a month. However, the youth in the three state facilities as well as the youth in the community meet on their own to work on projects such as:

- Events
- Capital classroom (working on bills)
- Engaging in other JJ councils
- Reading books such as "The New Jim Crow"

How did you initially recruit youth who are in facilities?

I had relationships with the youth and the staff in the facilities. Also, at my first SAG meeting [last March], the Assistant Secretary of Juvenile Rehabilitation and I had a conversation about how we could get them involved. She was very supportive of getting this started.

Do youth members who are in facilities join the SAG meetings via WebEx also?

We had one meeting at one of the facilities, and we were able to get the youth on the committee to this meeting to see what the SAG is. We recently appointed a youth from each of the three facilities to be on the SAG. Each youth is a youth committee member. They will be able to come in person or via WebX.

Connecting with Youth

Collaborating with youth can be difficult work. In response to a 2016 survey by the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, one SAG Chair stated, "Keeping youth members is a challenge. That's an understatement." Another indicated that, "It's been hard, attendance-wise, to keep them engaged."³

From a youth perspective, collaboration is cultivated through relationships. A majority of youth members said they first learned about their SAGs through their relationships, either with a current SAG member, or a relative or friend. Many other youth members first learned about their SAGs while working with another organization that focuses on juvenile justice reform, such as peer and youth courts, local juvenile justice agencies, CJJ, and partners in the department of health and human services. Eighty-three percent of youth cited a passion for juvenile justice and a desire to make a change as their primary motivation for becoming a SAG member, while the remaining 17% joined due to an interest in personal and professional development.

Youth Members Weigh In: What are the Best Ways to Recruit Youth?

Recruitment should be broad-based and include:

- Various jurisdictions throughout the state
- Different experiences throughout the juvenile justice continuum
- Racial/ethnic, age, and gender diversity

Ways to recruit youth:

- Promotion through social media and flyers
 - Develop a juvenile justice-focused Facebook page
 - Regularly post interesting materials, photos, etc., to keep young people engaged.
 - Regularly give information about recruitment for SAGs.
- Invite friends and family to meetings
- Make the SAG application process as easy as possible
 - Place the application online
 - Ensure the process is quick
 - Work with Governor to swiftly approve appointments
 - Avoid unnecessary bureaucratic jargon and acronyms

Where to recruit youth:

- Schools and After-School Programs
- Identify Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) who currently work with system involved youth.
 - Develop partnerships with key contacts at those agencies so that you are able to develop a longer-term recruitment pool.

- Reach out to local juvenile probation departments and placement facility staff.
 - Develop partnerships with key contacts at those agencies so that you are able to develop a longer-term recruitment pool.
- Choose facilities your SAG would like to recruit members from.
 - Identify youth who may be interested in joining.
 - Build SAG meeting structure and policies alongside their schedules.

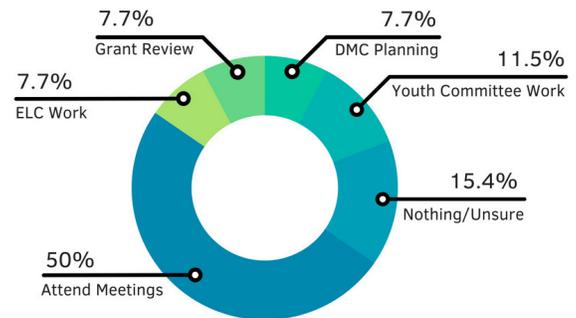
General Principles for Youth Recruitment⁴:

- Create an outreach strategy that connects with existing organizations and be intentional about asking young people to get involved.
- Plan a strategy that ensures diversity among youth involved in the program.
- Be intentional about creating a “revolving door” of youth leaders to ensure continuity.
- Balance the need for continuity in terms of issues with the integration of new young people who bring new ideas.

A majority of youth respondents felt that the process for becoming a SAG member was simple and straightforward, though one participant noted that someone who is not familiar with the traditional application process may find the formality and length of the process intimidating. This may be something to consider in the future. States should make applications as streamlined as possible, ensure that they are easily accessible and navigable, and that they make clear the fact that prior or current justice involvement is not a bar for participation.

Youth members say they engage with their State Advisory Groups in a variety of ways. Every SAG youth member said they attend SAG meetings. Several work on Youth Committee tasks, participate in grant reviews and 3-year planning, undertake Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) planning, or serve on their state’s Emerging Leaders Committee (ELC). However, 15% of participants in the survey were unaware of what their responsibilities as a SAG member were. Training for new youth members should clearly outline this information in youth-friendly language. It should also help demystify relevant acronyms and language used by the SAG.

WHAT RESPONSIBILITIES DO YOU HAVE AT YOUR SAG?



Barriers to Engagement

In regards to challenges, 23% of youth respondents reported that lacking clear information about their duties and responsibilities was the most difficult part of serving as a SAG member. To alleviate this, SAGs should improve their onboarding process to include training for youth and other new members. This could include the creation of a buddy system to provide someone to answer and check in with new members during their orientation to the SAG. Other top difficulties youth expressed included inflexible meeting times that were incompatible with their schedules, and frustration over the bureaucratic processes or internal politics within SAGs (15% each).

To address these challenges, SAGs should ensure they provide training for youth members around SAG policies and responsibilities shortly after they are appointed. SAGs should also provide accommodations to help youth members attend meetings, including stipends for transportation and meals and child care support, and should work with youth members to determine meeting times that are appropriate for youth schedules.

General Principles for Youth Engagement⁵:

- To the fullest extent possible, schedule meetings before or after school hours for school-aged youth. When a youth is not able to attend in person, consider allowing him/her to participate via alternative means, such as video-conferencing or conference calls.
- Explain your organization’s role to the youth and what issues you can and cannot address.

- Avoid using acronyms or legal jargon that may make it difficult for the youth to understand what is happening during the meeting.
- Prepare the youth for upcoming meetings by telling the youth who will be present, what their roles will be, what is expected to happen, and what the youth's involvement will entail.
- If the youth is expected to speak, provide guidance about how to do so most effectively. Advise the youth if other participants will ask him/her questions and what the nature of those questions may be. Provide age-appropriate reading materials to the youth to describe the organization's process.

How do SAGs Facilitate Youth Development?

Both survey and listening session participants would like to see SAGs hold more trainings in the future. Youth members specifically indicated interest in: trainings focused on youth-adult partnerships; DMC-specific training; professional training that equips youth with conflict resolution skills and practical knowledge; legal writing; peer mentoring for those coming out of the juvenile justice system; and personality traits training (i.e. Myers Briggs or BANK).

Spotlight on Colorado

Colorado's SAG has a thriving Youth Subcommittee, which is allocated \$20,000 out of the SAG's overall budget for members to use as they see fit. With this budget, youth members plan youth-specific events and community engagement initiatives to help the state better service youth, and receive stipends to attend SAG meetings and events.

Colorado's SAG has developed effective strategies to accommodate the challenges youth experience in attending meetings. The following is a non-exhaustive list of examples:

- Youth receive transportation stipends and mileage reimbursements through the Colorado SAG budget – allowing them to invest their time and energy into the council. There is a recognition that youth may not yet be working professionals and may have limited financial means, or jobs that do not cover time and travel expenses for this work.

- Further aid with transportation by offering rides to younger members who could not get to and from meetings themselves.
- Assistance finding felony-friendly housing, employment, and other resources.
- Address the needs of young advocates, including those with and without lived expertise in the system.
- Be open to helping address and remove outside barriers in the lives of youth members so that they can remain on the council.

For example, one youth member shared the following experience:

"I was allowed on the council without issues, even with my multiple felonies. At the time, the Emerging Leaders Committee Chair was a lawyer and guardian ad litem (GAL) serving on the council. I had just ended all of my probation requirements for all three of my cases in March of 2014. In the fall of 2014, I started going through the process to get my first internship at school and to get my name legally changed. Both of those situations required that I provide full documentation of my criminal history and complete court-ordered requirements. I was able to receive documentation from two counties, but not the third. That county never provided me a completion letter, and refused to speak with me when I contacted them on multiple occasions. Without their documentation, I was not going to be able to have my required internship for college, and would be placed on hold and potentially not be able to finish my bachelor's degree. The court would also not even consider my legal name change without full legal documents. During an ELC meeting our Chair asked how we were all doing, and it wasn't a surface question. She asked about our home lives, work lives, family, and legal situations. I vented to her, and she offered to contact the county's probation office as my lawyer to request my records. She quickly had my records within the next month, and I was able to change my name, attend my internship, and complete college. The documents she received for me are paramount to my life. I have had to use them at least 10 times since then. If I did not have them I'd be unable to be on a lease, have the job I have, and may have relapsed back into substance abuse and/or criminal behavior because I would have been hit so hard with barriers to my success."

Spotlight on Washington: Engaging Current Incarcerated Youth

“Our sub-committee meetings are actually set up to our schedule here at Green Hill School [a medium/maximum security facility for teenage males], and our meetings are usually over a WebX and conference calls. Our SAG as a whole meets at the capital once a month, and being that my peers and I are in a lockdown facility we are not able to leave campus at ease. This does not mean that we have not attended our main conference: last month we actually had the whole group come to GHS and we had a meeting here. They accommodate us very well.”

– Current Washington SAG Youth
Member at Green Hill School

There are a number of reasons youth enjoy being on their SAG. The majority of youth (62%) said they enjoy how their membership gives them the opportunity to be a voice for other youth and make a positive change for young people in their communities.

“I have had personal experience with the juvenile justice system when I was a minor. I have also been in foster care and have been an advocate for foster care system reform and improved outcomes for transitioning young people for the past seven years. I have come to learn that the foster care population and juvenile justice population, unfortunately, oftentimes overlap. Considering my own personal life experiences and passion for advocacy, I felt the SAG was an amazing opportunity for me to give back on a larger scale.”

Twenty-three percent of respondents also said they enjoyed the opportunity to learn from fellow SAG members from a variety of different fields and areas of expertise. Youth SAG members report that their social networks are highly supportive of their participation, with peers and family members regarding their membership with pride and respect (85%). Youth members reported feeling supported in their State Advisory Groups, with 50% of SAG youth members feeling completely supported, and 14% feeling at least

somewhat supported by their groups. Seventy-seven percent of youth feel their voice is heard and valued in their SAGs, though 15% of participants reported feeling their voice was ignored in SAG discussions. All members of both the Colorado and Washington listening sessions stated that they felt heard in their SAGs.



How do SAGs Collaborate with Youth?

Nonetheless, 33% of youth members reported that they feel intimidated by their fellow adult SAG members. Some expressed doubts about whether adult SAG members really viewed youth opinions equally, and others noted that it can be challenging to enter a space where many of the adult SAG members are already good friends or colleagues. Some youth (17%) noted that it is difficult to speak up, especially on policy matters with which they are less experienced, and feel they have had less practice doing so than older SAG members.

To remedy this, youth recommended adult SAG members continue to pursue deeper engagement through conversation with youth. One participant suggested SAGs always ask for youth input in meetings, rather than waiting for youth members to volunteer information. Another indicated they would feel less intimidated if more youth members were recruited and present during discussions. Because 23% of youth participants reported not feeling like every meeting was a safe space, one SAG youth member recommends all SAGs undergo Safe Space Training⁶ to ensure there are established, communal ground rules for conduct within meetings.⁷

Youth members from Washington stated that both good communication, and a space that allows for the sharing of different perspectives, are key factors in

determining whether they want to engage with a group. Members from Colorado agreed that it was important to create a space where young people can actively engage, noting that true collaboration involves, “not just being at the table, but speaking at the table.”

From a Youth Member in Colorado: When Do We Feel Heard?

- Colorado's SAG values the lived experience of all its youth members.
- We feel heard when our autonomy and real power to create meaningful change is supported. We are supported through our annual budget of \$20,000 that we can use in whatever way and towards whatever initiatives we see as important.
- We feel most heard when we are not viewed as tokens, but rather as members with unique perspectives. For example, we are often on the front lines of social justice issues and bring important perspective. We feel heard when the older council members value and support our opinions and initiatives.
- Some of our Initiatives include
 1. LGBTQ Tool Kit
 2. Professional development training for youth.
 3. Youth Experiencing Homelessness Project.
 4. Funding for Office of the Independent Monitor to put on the facilitation of a law enforcement and youth dialogue summit.
- We feel heard when the council treats youth members as capable.
- We feel heard when older council members act as mentors.

Equipping Young Leaders: A Currently-Incarcerated SAG Youth Member in Washington State Weighs In

“Our Youth Sub-Committee is youth-led, although we have a chair from DSHS. Our leaders try to have us speak and take over as much as possible. They believe that our voices are the most important ones and they try to learn from us because we are the ones going through it day in and day out, so who better to

ask? With this, I would say that it is much needed for those leading SAGs to stress the importance to the youth to continue to be leaders, especially in situations like I am in right now. Being the best you, you can be does not go unnoticed, and if everyone on the SAG would do that then sooner or later it WILL [emphasis in original text] start to rub off on those around them.”

Youth reported that they wanted to know how they could get more involved with their SAG, and what input they, as youth, could provide. Youth members have a desire to become more deeply involved in SAG work than they already are. To facilitate this, given the limited financial resources and other challenges facing youth members - some of whom are currently incarcerated - SAGs may need to pursue new and creative means of collaboration.

Youth also expressed a desire to have more in-person SAG meetings. In-person connections and the relationships that meetings enable people to build are a priority for young people. Youth from Colorado indicated they believe in-person contact is a key part of collaboration, and that they would like to see more SAG activities that gather youth members together simply to build rapport.

Recommendations for How SAGS Can Better Collaborate with Youth

“The best recommendation that I can give would have to be for all SAGs to have a youth sub-committee like Washington state. Our SAG leaders take what we say and express it in the best way they know how, not to mention we are brought to the table when they have their meetings. Having a youth that is going through the system firsthand can have a bigger and much more powerful impact than some may think. Continue to help youth help those making these big policy changes, because they are the ones feeling the effects.”

– Washington SAG Youth Member

“Apply the understanding that youth truly want to be on the council for a reason. Youth want to help. They want to develop their lives and their careers. They really care, and they really want to learn. They care about their peers and want to make a real

difference in improving the Juvenile Justice System. For example, through being on Colorado's State Advisory Group, I have gained an internship position with the Office of the Alternate Defense Counsel in Denver. This position has been instrumental for me in gaining an incredible education, creating meaningful change, and bringing my resume up to a higher caliber. In conclusion, Understand how much youth members care and meet them there!"

– Colorado SAG Youth Member

Conclusion

Meaningful youth collaboration is challenging, but possible and critically important to juvenile justice system improvement. State Advisory Groups should consider how to integrate youth collaboration into all aspects of their work, including their budgets, onboarding processes, meeting structures, development and training initiatives, and interpersonal engagements. Youth participants in this research have indicated that such practices are reinforcing: continue to partner with youth members to create systems that work for youth, and more youth members will feel welcome and empowered to join.

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Notes:

¹ State Advisory Groups were established under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) and SAG members are appointed by Governors/Chief Executives in each U.S. jurisdiction. They are principally responsible for monitoring and supporting their state's progress in addressing the four core requirements of the JJDP. SAGs can also go by different names in each state, such as the Juvenile Justice Advisory Council (JJAC), Juvenile Justice Advisory Group (JJAG), etc. For more information about the SAG in your area, please visit <http://www.juvjustice.org/about-us/state-advisory-group-members>.

² Coalition for Juvenile Justice, "Building State Advisory Group Capacity: A Toolkit for Effective Juvenile Justice Leadership." (July 2016). Available at http://www.juvjustice.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/SAG%20Capacity%20Building%20Toolkit_final.pdf.

³ Coalition for Juvenile Justice, "Increasing State Advisory Group Effectiveness: Building Capacity for State Leadership." (July 2016). Available at www.juvjustice.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/Increasing%20SAG%20Effectiveness_0.pdf.

⁴ Karen Pittman, Shanetta Martin, & Anderson Williams (July 2007). "Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change," The Forum for Youth Investment. Available at http://forumfyi.org/files/FINALYouth_Engagment_8.15.pdf.

⁵ Andrea Khoury (November 2007). "With Me, not Without me: How to Involve Children in Court." in Child Law Practice Vol. 26, No. 9, American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law. Available at http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/empowerment/withme_notwithoutme.authcheckdam.pdf; Andrea Khoury (July 2008). "Establishing Policies for Youth in Court—Overcoming Common Concerns," American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law. Available at <http://www.isc.idaho.gov/cp/docs/Establishing%20Policies%20for%20Youth%20in%20Court-Common%20Concerns.pdf>.

⁶ Safe-space trainings can be found at http://www.cypq.org/products_and_services/training/YWM.

⁷ For additional LGBTQ-specific guidelines, please visit <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/publications-a-z/496-tips-and-strategies-for-creating-a-safe-space-for-glbtcq-youth>.



For more information, contact the Coalition for Juvenile Justice

Phone: 202-467-0864

Email: info@juvjustice.org

Web: www.juvjustice.org

Address: 1319 F Street NW, Suite 402, Washington, DC 20004