

YOUTH PARTNERSHIP: A CALL TO ACTION FOR STATE ADVISORY GROUPS



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Introduction

Authentic engagement of youth and individuals with lived expertise in the youth justice system are critical. Not only are these voices required under the federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDA) to be on the State Advisory Group (SAG) but they are key to sustained, successful system improvements. SAGs and youth justice agency leaders cannot treat youth engagement as an “extra” or a privilege for young people. Rather, successful reforms require that youth engagement be central to any system improvement, accountability, or reform effort. Indeed, SAGs and youth justice agency leaders that practice authentic engagement see their opportunity to listen and learn from youth as their privilege and the only path to achieving their goals.

This guide walks SAGs and the youth justice agency staff that support them, through key phases of authentic youth engagement and provides steps SAGs can take no matter their existing level of youth engagement. Each is divided into 101 (introductory), 201 (intermediate) and 301 (advanced) levels of engagement. CJJ encourages SAGs to honestly self-assess their existing practices and readiness for authentic youth engagement and start taking steps from wherever they are.

CJJ highlights three key themes (discussed further on the next page) throughout this guide that are crucial to the success of youth partnership efforts by SAGs.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) provides the requirement for youth membership in [a template membership roster](#): "At least one-fifth of the members shall be under the age of 28 at the time of initial appointment; and At least three members have been or currently are under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system, or if not feasible and in appropriate circumstances, the parent or guardian of someone who has been or is currently under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system." This language mirrors that found in the [Juvenile Justice Reform Act](#).

Our use of “youth with lived expertise in the youth justice system” includes all youth who the system has incarcerated, detained, supervised in the community, prosecuted, or referred to community-based services.

Key Themes

● First, SAGs with successful youth partnership models have found ways to work through and around bureaucracy to make membership manageable and worthwhile for youth. Youth, especially youth with lived expertise in the youth justice system, care deeply about system improvement, but need practical and meaningful opportunities to help create change.

● Second, youth partnership work is cyclical and requires consistent focus. As youth age and move onto other opportunities, SAGs need to bring in, train, and support new youth members.

● Finally, and perhaps most importantly, building and sustaining a corps of active and engaged youth members requires relationships between youth and adults on the SAG. Relationships are key for recruitment and retention, and should be of a depth to remain after youth leave the SAG.

CJJ recommends actions and provides instructive models in the following phases of authentic youth engagement:

- Recruitment
- Onboarding
- Retention
- Transitioning off the SAG
- Opportunities for non-member youth engagement

Recruitment Action Steps

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If SAGs are not already fulfilling the JJPDPA's youth requirements, identify ways to recruit and meaningfully engage multiple youth under 28 and youth with lived expertise. SAGs across the country continue to struggle meeting the youth membership requirement for Title II compliance, but several states have demonstrated that intentional focus and adequately dedicating time and funding resources to meet the spirit, not just the letter, of the JJPDPA results in much better fulfillment of the SAG's responsibilities and opportunities at the state level.

Achieving the spirit of the requirement should mean youth SAG members are not tokenized. Tokenization can occur when all youth are treated as a monolith of experience represented by this one young person or when the SAG merely 'checks the box' of youth membership without authentically listening to youth voice.

Recruitment among youth in the community can occur through the networks of existing SAG members or by participating in events where youth already gather, such as school activity fairs, alternative high schools, college campuses, or even fairs or rodeos.

Some SAGs have seen success engaging youth who are currently incarcerated and share several considerations in order to build a working relationship that is beneficial to the youth member, working professionals within the SAG, and the SAG as a whole.

SAGs should open conversations with facilities by identifying barriers and asking how they can engage youth in facilities without exacerbating staffing challenges. Especially in the wake of COVID, many facilities struggle to retain, train, or recruit staff. Relatedly, SAGs should seek to understand and respond to how COVID has affected youth in facilities and the conditions in which they are living.

The Montana SAG experienced this challenge and reached an interim compromise solution with a facility, "While detention and correctional facilities inform the SAG of important issues facing justice-involved youth, liability and staffing shortages make it difficult for most facilities to coordinate virtual meetings or conference calls for a single youth. The Ted Lechner Youth Services Center, a juvenile detention center in Billings, has agreed to conduct surveys of youth and share the results with the Montana SAG. This will increase input from detained youth while limiting the burden on facility staff."

[Washington State](#) has a history of creatively solving challenges to engage youth in facilities. It took collaborative effort at the highest levels of the state's agency, namely the Juvenile Rehabilitation (JR) Assistant Secretary and Superintendent at Green Hill School, to implement the initial effort to cultivate youth engagement. The SAG Chair also had existing relationships with youth and staff in facilities thanks to years of direct service, and was able to build buy-in among agency leadership.

“Youth voice is organized as a way to gain the youth’s perspective on what’s working and what’s not regarding their juvenile justice experience, as well as input on treatment processes and outcomes for rehabilitation; current and future policies; and process redesign. JR youth members gained valuable experience in advocacy and self-empowerment through the process with the support of leadership and staff. Their voice helped inform our system reform efforts and eventually some of the youth members took a more active role in serving in the Washington State SAG,” reports Alice Coil, Juvenile Justice Specialist.

Finding a balance between security restrictions and fair opportunities for youth members to engage in meetings is crucial. For example, Washington’s SAG was able to authentically engage youth in facilities by obtaining permission for youth to join SAG meetings via webcam. Other methods could include SAG members who are cleared as volunteers or employees by the relevant state agency to join and support participation by a youth member in the facility.

The Idaho SAG’s [bylaws](#), mirroring federal law, require that “at least three members shall have been or currently be under the jurisdiction of the youth justice system or, if not feasible and in appropriate circumstances, shall be the parent or guardian of someone who has been or is currently under the jurisdiction of the youth justice system.”

201

SAG Chairs and Juvenile Justice Specialists should check in about youth membership at least annually, and plan ahead to recruit new members when existing members may leave or “age out.” Ongoing outreach and communication with youth-serving organizations and advocacy groups in the state can be a strong recruitment technique and maintaining warm relationships can ease recruitment when the SAG needs new youth members.

301

SAG websites should be up to date, concise, easy to navigate and jargon-free. They should include a page owned by the SAG’s youth committee with relevant information for interested youth, including roles, responsibilities, and payment processes for youth members. Idaho’s State Advisory Group [website](#) has a specific page for their youth committee which is easy to read and navigate, and has projects that the youth committee has worked on.

Other Considerations for Recruitment

A Standardized and Transparent Selection Process: SAGs should ensure that the standards governing who can join a SAG, including as a youth member, are applied consistently and are made public so all potential applicants can be aware of them. If those standards create a barrier for an applicant, SAG leaders should explain that barrier and steps the applicant could take to overcome the barrier where possible and appropriate.

Improved Efficiency for Youth Appointments Through a Governor's Appointed Representative: The Governor appointment process can create barriers to youth membership on the SAG, including delaying appointments, requiring unreasonable application steps of youth, or allowing politics to get in the way of the best possible youth members. Some states have explored or begun to use a recent change to OJJDP guidance authorizing a Governor's Appointed Representative to appoint SAG members. For example, the Executive Director of the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute (a state agency) appoints SAG youth members. Indiana found that using this process reduced politicization and wait times for appointments. When introducing such a practice, SAGs may find it easiest to identify a state agent who already has similar appointment powers and to make the request in conjunction with other submissions such as the three-year plan.



Onboarding Action Steps

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SAGs should provide all new members, including youth members, a [handbook](#) or other orientation resources with clearly explained roles, leadership opportunities, practices, and language or background research that members may find it helpful to know for meetings. SAGs should also have a one-on-one session with each new member to review the handbook, provide time for questions, and develop rapport with SAG leaders or staff. Take this time to ask new members, especially youth, to share what they would like to work on or ideas they have.

Guidance on language should include education on people-first language, such as “people with lived experience” rather than youth justice system terms of art such as “juvenile”, “offender”, or “delinquent,” and explain commonly used acronyms and jargon. Two sample onboarding documents can be found at the links provided: a guide to common [acronyms](#) and [glossary of terms](#), which SAGs may want to use as templates with additional locally relevant information. Onboarding materials for youth would cover how youth members are compensated and potential tax implications.

Onboarding resources should also explain conflicts of interest and lobbying in a way most people can understand, avoiding legal jargon and not overstating the limitation on advocacy by members. An absolute bar on all advocacy by youth members is inappropriate and may bar well-qualified youth from participating. For example, Montana’s SAG includes a youth member who is also a well known advocate on youth issues, and, rather than let that limit his SAG membership, the staff supports him to separate his roles so that his advocacy efforts outside of the SAG don’t become connected with the youth committee or give the impression that his voice is the voice of the youth committee or SAG.

2OI

SAGs should also consider building the communication skills, strategic [sharing skills](#), and shared language among new members, both youth and adults. CJJ has two resources available for youth developing their strategic sharing skills, [a IOI guide](#) and a [worksheet](#).

Traditional SAG orientations may include the basics of Robert’s Rules, but building restorative or transformative communication skills among members may significantly contribute to crucial relationship building and healing support by the SAG. SAGs can also support new members by partnering new and existing members to build a support network during meetings as new members become comfortable.

3OI

Use a job description format to define [youth members’](#) roles, including responsibilities and benefits of the position. Youth on SAGs and other governing bodies can struggle to understand their role beyond being present, and these position descriptions can also serve as an accountability tool for the SAG when they lose sight of authentic engagement.

Retention Action Steps

Authentic youth engagement on the SAG is not a one-time campaign, but instead requires an intentional focus on retaining youth members while recruiting new ones. Retention of youth members relies on three things:

- payment,
- power, and
- relationships.

Payment

IOI

SAGs should pay youth members for their work in all SAG-related activities, including SAG meetings, youth committee meetings, listening sessions, conferences, speaking engagements, or meetings they engage in as SAG members. SAGs should also pre-pay for expenses youth may incur as a SAG member, including travel costs. Idaho and Iowa's SAGs emphasized how important it is to pre-pay youth travel expenses, especially since youth often don't have credit cards they can use for hotels. Washington, DC includes youth stipends and related youth expenses, such as travel costs, in its Title II application's budget and budget narrative as a portion of the SAG allocation.

2OI

SAGs should also remove bureaucratic barriers to a smooth and easy payment process for youth payments. Washington, DC grants its youth stipend dollars to a local non-profit organization with pre-existing protocols and practices for paying youth in a way that works for youth and is much easier than the months-long invoice process required by the government. The non-profit organization is able to pay youth via common and easy-to-use apps like Venmo.

3OI

The amount SAGs pay youth varies widely. CJJ encourages SAGs to consider following a standard and publicly accessible guide, such the federal [Office of Personnel Management guide](#), to determine stipend amounts for youth members. State and federal minimum wage standards may be considered as a floor, with recognition that young people, like other experts who are advising an organization in a consulting capacity, should be paid at a rate that recognizes the value of the expertise they bring to the work.

Other Considerations for Payment

Are youth members employees, contractors, or neither? Absent some separate agreement between the state and youth, the roles and responsibilities of youth SAG members do not make them employees or contractors of the state. Some SAGs have expressed concern that paying youth members more than \$600 annually could create an implied employee relationship. While this line does trigger required reporting as income to the IRS, it in no way creates or implies an employee relationship. SAGs may want to reference the [IRS's guidance](#) on what makes someone an employee or contractor of an organization.

In addition to stipends and travel expenses, SAGs can provide other benefits that increase youth members' resources and, thereby, their capacity to engage in the SAG. SAG members can connect youth members to help with child care, housing, work, and education opportunities. In addition, SAGs provide professional and personal development and may support youth members representing that development on resumes or through references for work or education. SAGs also have significant opportunities to connect youth members with public speaking and other leadership opportunities, and should be prepared to help youth make the most of those opportunities through support with professional dress and chances to practice in front of an audience.



Power

IOI

Ensure SAG meetings are safe, productive spaces with clear and diverse opportunities for youth members to contribute. Oftentimes youth and families with lived expertise continue to be affected by harms or oppressive power dynamics experienced in the youth justice system, and all youth and families arrive with different cultural expectations for youth speaking up.

Youth members have a right to be heard, to speak, and to contribute to the SAG in meaningful ways without being harassed, silenced, or manipulated. Youth members also have a right to privacy and confidentiality. For example, information that is shared in a small group setting should stay that way unless the youth member would like to share it more broadly.

A trusted adult should communicate one-on-one with youth before, during, and after each SAG meeting. These conversations should include what youth can expect in the SAG meeting, strategic sharing tips, reviewing the agenda and their potential role with each agenda item, a review on how to use [Robert's Rules](#) to make or contribute to a motion or encouraging youth to share other ideas they might have. SAG leaders can support preparation and increase comfort by providing agendas ahead of time with time estimates for topics and allowing sufficient time for everyone to engage, especially youth. This ensures that everyone has the capacity to participate and share ideas in a safe and engaging environment.

When engaging youth who are incarcerated, SAGs must keep in mind additional challenges to creating a safe and nurturing environment for youth engagement on the SAG. Most facilities have rules that youth have to follow at all times, including when participating in virtual or in person SAG meetings, and SAG leadership should know and keep these in mind. For example, youth could face consequences for saying 'butt', 'schnike', or other substitutes for swear words. However, youth should always be permitted to participate in meetings in their own clothes and without limitations to their movement.

SAGs must also address the inherent power imbalance that exists between youth and staff in facilities. Staff who monitor and support youth during meetings should be partners in the SAG's youth engagement efforts, have received training on how to support youth members, and have open communication with SAG leaders.

Working with youth from facilities relies on building rapport and trust. Adults have often violated the trust of youth who are incarcerated, despite encouraging the youth to trust or rely on them. As a result, youth may have barriers to quick and easy relationships with adults that will require SAG leaders to demonstrate consistency, compassion, and consideration to change a youth's perspective.

SAGs should support a strong and independent Youth Committee to give youth members a space of their own to lead projects and develop recommendations for the full SAG. Youth Committees in some SAGs have developed their own [bylaws](#), [mission](#), and [vision](#) statements, and have positions that match the skills and interests of the youth members.

Youth committees on several SAGs have also led their own projects in addition to joining the work of the SAG.

Idaho and Iowa's youth committees both conduct outreach to youth in the justice system and bring the voices of those youth to state leaders. Idaho's Youth Voice Tour in detention and correctional facilities administers a survey that the state then uses to develop an understanding of the current needs of youth and develop programs to meet those needs. Iowa's Talking Wall project collects input via sticky notes from hundreds of young people in facilities across the state, which the SAG and other leaders then rely on to develop policy and programming.

Idaho's active youth committee has partnered with the local community college to create newsletters on topics relevant to youth in the system, including bullying, substance use disorders, and mental health. These newsletters go to youth justice detention centers, correctional facilities, and probation departments. The youth committee also provides a resource handbook for youth being released from state custody that includes all types of information to help with their reintegration including:

- how to obtain an ID, social security card, birth certificate or driver's license;
- how to seek and apply for jobs;
- where to find community resources like counseling, food banks, shelter or transportation; and
- how to set up a bank account.

Iowa's youth committee, known as the Youth Justice Council, worked with a local law school to create recommended changes to state administrative rules governing hygiene products for youth in facilities. The youth committee heard concerns from youth about a lack of culturally appropriate hygiene products from youth during their Talking Wall project and developed an administrative rule change to address the problem. The Iowa SAG then voted to support the recommended change, demonstrating their support to the Youth Justice Council.

SAGs should build a leadership pathway for youth before, during, and after their time on the SAG. Before youth join the SAG, create low-barrier, low-demand opportunities to engage, such as advisory memberships on ad hoc committees where youth with relevant lived expertise can provide input and leadership for short periods of time and without having to go through the appointment process.

Structure the SAG to provide different levels of engagement and leadership for appointed youth members, such as membership on a youth committee, leadership roles on the youth committee, and support for youth taking leadership roles on the full SAG or its committees. For example, the Washington, DC SAG changed its bylaws to create a Youth Chair role. This co-chair of the full SAG is a position that can only be held by a youth member but is an optional role, filled only if a youth member has the capacity and interest to do it. This also serves as an opportunity for youth to receive additional, targeted support to step into the overall Vice Chair or Chair role.

SAGs also have multiple opportunities to advance the professional development of youth members, including by supporting their participation in national and statewide conferences or learning opportunities. CJJ hosts multiple national conferences each year that provide excellent growth and development opportunities for youth SAG members.

Finally, as youth transition off the SAG, support them in cementing and using the network they have built through their SAG membership to advance their professional goals.



Relationships

IOI

Creating a working relationship with youth requires consistency, consideration, and compassion. Youth that come through any facet of the system may experience hesitation to work with new adults and form meaningful connections due to learning from harmful experiences with untrustworthy adults in the past. Working with youth and their families can be like peeling back an onion one layer at a time. From power dynamics within facilities to the unique communication style that each family has, SAG members and other working professionals have to be conscious of that and when engaging with youth and families it should be done out of care and concern. Families and youth come from various backgrounds of knowledge, resiliency, and power.

2OI

Support mentor partnerships among youth and adult SAG members. Mentor partnerships center learning for both people, removing the traditional expectations that adult mentors teach and youth mentees learn. One of the best ways to offer support is one-on-one relationships with youth SAG members. Solicit their input on topics that they are passionate about or believe in. Older adults should honestly and truly listen, regardless of political, religious, or personal beliefs and give genuine feedback.

Washington, DC accomplished this by making partnerships optional and requiring all participants to demonstrate that they understand and bought into the partnership principle before pairing. Older adults, especially, may struggle to see themselves in a learning role, and Washington, DC screened out anyone who could not envision how they would learn through the partnership.

3OI

SAG leaders should remain consistently trustworthy and maintain relationships if youth SAG members become involved or re-involved in the youth justice system during their term on the SAG. This may include keeping youth updated about ongoing work of the SAG that they had the opportunity to influence. For example, Washington, DC has continued to engage youth as advisors through and during periods of incarceration while supporting them to continue the application process. SAGs should consider the benefit and harms of removing youth for re-involvement with the system. Support of youth with system involvement includes support when they face challenges.

Transitioning Off the SAG Action Steps

Youth SAG members may wish to serve the SAG in a different capacity as they grow into adulthood and gain new professional capacities. SAGs should help youth identify areas of interest and assist youth in the transition in to new roles on the SAG whenever possible, offering continuous support as youth members acclimate to their new positions and titles on the SAG.

IOI

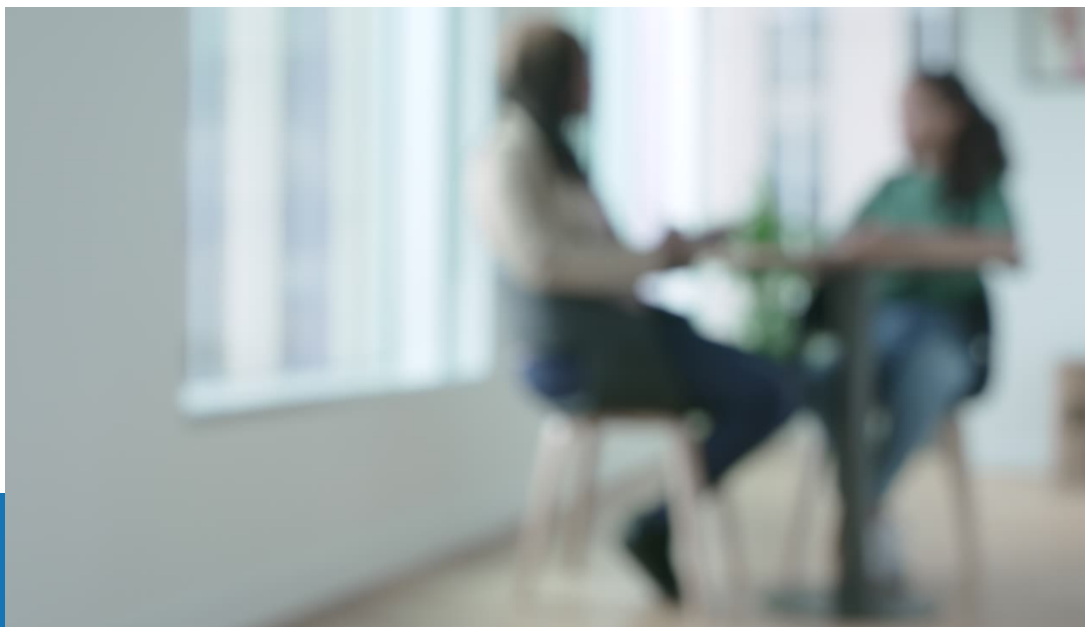
Conduct exit surveys or interviews with youth and apply feedback to future youth membership efforts.

2OI

Youth members should have been appointed before age 28, and SAGs should allow youth members to continue SAG service in their professional role at their next renewal while removing their 'youth member' designation. In this way, SAGs can support youth members transitioning into other SAG member roles when youth choose to go into government roles, youth-serving or advocacy organizations, or other roles related to the youth justice system.

3OI

SAG members may also be able to provide professional network connections to youth transitioning off the SAG. This can include helping build resumes, reviewing cover letters, practicing interview skills, acting as a professional reference, and helping youth navigate working as a professional.



Opportunities for Non-member Engagement

Engagement opportunities for young people beyond those who currently serve on the SAG can stir interest in the SAG, help to identify and overcome barriers, implement systemic change, and create equitable solutions to problems that youth face.

IOI

SAGs should conduct surveys to collect input from broad groups of youth, including participants in Title II grantees' programs, youth on probation, or youth in local high schools. Local higher education institutions or state data agencies may be able to support survey and data analysis efforts. Idaho's SAG uses surveys to collect data and demographics from youth inside facilities. This has led to identifying problem areas, holes in services, and can provide insight on how we can best serve our youth. During an analysis of surveys, Idaho's SAG learned that girls experience higher rates of trauma than their male counterparts, have less placement options, and in general do not have as many opportunities for safe and equitable services. By identifying these problem areas, Idaho's SAG has been able to bridge the gap in services and create more opportunities for gender-based care.

2OI

SAGs may also want to conduct listening sessions with youth in programs and facilities to learn more about a program, their experiences, or an issue area that the SAG is considering weighing in on. Listening sessions can open the door for relationships and provide much more robust qualitative information than surveys. This can also be an effective recruitment tool for youth inside facilities.

3OI

Several SAGs also have active youth advisory members who do not have a voting, appointed position, but can still meaningfully contribute in discussions both of the Youth Committee and the SAG. Advisory positions can also lead to full appointments for youth who can test out SAG participation as an advisor, or use the position to engage while waiting on an official appointment. Advisory positions are sometimes helpful as opportunities to engage youth detained in facilities who the governor may be hesitant to officially appoint to the SAG.

Conclusion

While working with youth can be challenging, the knowledge and expertise that is exchanged when authentic youth engagement is present is invaluable. Young people, particularly those who are or who have been involved with the justice system possess unique expertise to help us better understand how the system is truly working and ways in which we can improve it.

For more guidance on effective State Advisory Groups download [CJJ's Building State Advisory Group Capacity Toolkit](#), and reach out to Coalition of Juvenile Justice at info@juvjustice.org or to our partners at the [Annie E Casey Foundation](#) for additional support with effective and authentic youth engagement.

