



STRATEGY BRIEF

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

What are some best practices for **recruiting and working with youth advisory boards?**

Youth advisory boards or councils¹ are a common youth engagement strategy. These bodies give youth currently or formerly impacted by the child welfare system a voice, help youth build professional skillsets and experience that may lead to future employment, and inform systems to improve services for future youth.

Youth advisory boards may convene briefly (to develop recommendations on a specific issue, for example) or serve as long-term partners, advising agency staff on every aspect of their work. These groups vary greatly in how the youth and adults work together and share power, from agency-sponsored groups that are highly structured and managed by adult mentors to independent advocacy groups that are entirely youth-led with adult support.

Before creating a youth advisory board, it is important to prepare the agency for youth involvement and consider which engagement strategies will best serve the agency's needs. Once agency staff have considered why they want to engage youth, determined that an advisory board is the best approach, and explored the agency's readiness to share power authentically with youth, implementing the practices discussed in this brief can help promote effective recruitment and retention of members, address common challenges, and prevent harm to youth.



What are some best practices for recruiting and working with youth advisory boards?

This brief is one in a three-part series developed in partnership with experienced youth and family advocates from [Family Voices United](#),^{2,3} a collaborative project among Casey Family Programs, [Children's Trust Fund Alliance](#), [FosterClub](#), and [Generations United](#). Other briefs in the series include:

- [How can agencies and organizations prepare for authentic youth engagement?](#)
- [What does it mean to value youth partners as assets?](#)

Recruiting youth

It is not possible for one or two youth to represent the concerns of an entire population. Tapping the same few youth repeatedly for advisory and leadership roles not only constricts the youth voice, it also can lead to burnout among the few selected. To avoid these pitfalls, **recruit youth broadly, actively, and on an ongoing basis** to ensure a diversity of fresh voices and perspectives. Youth advisors and those who manage youth advisory boards suggest the following recruitment strategies:

Treat every youth in care like a prospective advisor.

Youth's future willingness to engage with and support agency efforts as young adults and advocates will depend in part on how the agency treated them while in care, as well as their parents. Communicate an agencywide expectation that all youth's perspectives are listened to and valued, and put action behind those words.

Create a clear job description.

Serving on a youth advisory board is a significant commitment and should be outlined and compensated as such. Just as professionals would never accept a job without seeing a job description and knowing how much it pays, we should not expect youth to accept an advisory position without a clear description of the role's purpose, expectations, compensation, and benefits. The process of creating a job description also will help the agency clarify and articulate the skills youth will need to be successful in the role.

Make the application process youth-friendly.

Agencies and organizations should define clearly the terms used in the recruitment solicitation. Youth who have experienced congregate care, for example, may not recognize that phrasing, but they will know that they lived in a home with other, unrelated youths and staff who worked in shifts. Allow youth to apply in multiple ways, such as through an online form or responding to prompts via video or audio rather than in writing.

Spread the word.

Much of the recruitment for youth advisory boards comes through word of mouth, and youth are more likely to participate when other youth invite them. Recruitment of youth still in foster care often will be indirect, through case managers and other program staff. Make it easy for professionals to refer youth by providing templates, images, and text that they can copy and paste quickly and simply into an email. Reach out to other agency partners and schools for help identifying a diversity of youth.

Our motto is: 'Advocate, Change, and Empower.' We want all youth to know that whatever your circumstances, you can give back, speak up, and change the system. You no longer need to be silent. We will create the space and opportunity for you to tell us about your experience, and we're going to do something about it.

— BREE BRADLEY,
COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, LOUISIANA ELITE ADVOCACY FORCE

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to conflicts. “Part of a positive, productive environment is about playing together — doing things that aren’t just the work,” Pitcher says. “Play charades on Zoom, or go get ice cream. Play is super important.” It is equally important to plan for and normalize the occasional conflict. Many groups prepare for this by working with the youth to establish ground rules or community agreements, and revisiting them regularly.

Examples

The [Louisiana Elite Advocacy Force](#) (LEAF) is a youth advocacy board that has achieved considerable success in recent years, including drafting the state’s first [Foster Youth Bill of Rights](#), signed into law in 2021, testifying in support of a bill to extend foster care to age 21, and working closely with youth in extended foster care to help young adults transition to living independently. The group’s motto is: “Advocate, Change, and Empower.” LEAF is funded by the state’s Department of Children and Family Services and recruits youth in a variety of ways, including through peer supports (who are all LEAF board members) in regional independent living programs, social media, coordination with social workers, and word of mouth. The group attributes much of its success to its close-knit executive team, which maintains a “buddy system” to keep board members connected and informed, and the officers check in personally with each member regularly. This was especially critical during 2021, when both the COVID-19 pandemic and Hurricane Ida affected many board members. Positive relationships among the group are cultivated through regularly scheduled working retreats, with one each year focused on team bonding. “We recently had a retreat where we did rock climbing and ziplining,” says Bree Bradley, LEAF communications officer. “It took

me completely out of my comfort zone. But it brought the team together in new ways. It made me think of my colleagues as not just colleagues, but friends I can trust.”

[FosterClub](#) seeks to involve youth in foster care and alumni of foster care in many aspects of the organization, including its [All-Star internship](#), [PeerUp! pilot program](#), and [National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council](#). For each opportunity, FosterClub creates a detailed description that includes the purpose of the program, what the youth will do, and what they will gain from participating (including compensation and skills). “We treat it like a job,” says Erich Pitcher, former youth programs director. “We’re clear it’s a service opportunity, but we treat it with the same respect. It has a description, competencies, and goals.” FosterClub also invests considerable staff time to support its youth consultants. That begins by making sure expectations are communicated clearly, early, and often — in writing as well as verbally, using youth-friendly language. It also offers youth extensive training and preparation for each role, as well as frequent check-ins (briefings, office hours, and one-to-one follow up). Conflict among the youth advocates is expected, normalized, and addressed early by establishing well-defined group agreements and modeling effective conflict resolution.

At the federal level, the [Administration for Children and Families Youth Engagement Team](#) was convened in 2020 with high-level agency support to identify key recommendations for achieving permanency for all children and youth waiting in foster care. The 12-person team was led by an experienced young adult advocate with lived experience and composed of a racially diverse group of youth advocates from across the country, including LGBTQ youth, tribal youth, and youth with disabilities.

To make an informed decision, I need to know the context and what’s happening on the ground. Then I can relate it to my lived experience. I may need to be educated on a topic, but I don’t need to be pressured into an opinion.

— ALEKS TALSKY,

ALUMNUS OF FOSTER CARE, BOARD MEMBER FOR THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR CHILDREN’S LEGAL REPRESENTATION, WISCONSIN

What are some best practices for recruiting and working with youth advisory boards?

Communication and ongoing support are critical for youth. We need to connect with you, be mindful of communication differences, and continuously circle back to ensure we keep that clear connection throughout the process.

— JESSICA CARDENAS,
KINSHIP CAREGIVER, TEXAS

The team participated in [three roundtables](#) to offer recommendations on how agencies and courts could improve permanency outcomes by supporting connections with kin, securing relational permanency for youth, and achieving successful adoptions for older youth. The team also participated in a social media campaign and other outreach to states. Team leader Joshua Christian emphasizes the importance of supporting the team in a variety of ways, including office hours, personal phone and text check-ins, and professional skill development and coaching. “It is critical to prioritize support for the team in your budget,” he says. “If there’s enough money, you can set it up so

that you can prepare team members for opportunities, support them throughout, and debrief with them after, if they choose. A lot of young people get into this work thinking it’s going to be healing. But without adequate support and self-care, it can do the opposite.” Christian recommends having more than one person available to support team members. For example, matching members one-to-one with agency staff mentors could broaden the support available to youth advocates and build more personal connections between staff and youth, helping staff better appreciate the importance of youth partnership.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 For a list of state youth advocacy/advisory boards and foster care alumni associations, see: www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.dspList&rolType=Custom&RS_ID=160
- 2 Content of this brief was developed with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team during four meetings in 2021: May 6, June 1, June 25, and Oct. 22. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience in the child welfare system, and who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children’s Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Team members who contributed to this brief include Aleks Talksby, Aliyah Zeien, Ryan Young, Rimy Morris, Jessica Cardenas, and Amanda Cruce.
- 3 This brief was informed by interviews with Bree Bradley, Aliyah Zeien, Antonica Frazier, Jarvis Spearman, and Keedy Bradley, Louisiana Elite Advocacy Force, on Oct. 7, 2021; Rimy Morris, Indiana Youth Advisory Board and Megan Tribble, Foster Success, on Oct. 8, 2021; Joshua Christian and Ryan Young, Administration for Children and Families Youth Engagement Team, on Oct. 18, 2021; Angel Petite, Erich Pitcher, and Leah Woodcock, FosterClub, on Aug. 3, 2021; and Samuel Martin, SDM Consulting, on May 10, 2021.

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