

# YOUTH POWER!



## New York State Success Youth Involvement Toolkit

Tools for Incorporating Youth Guided Practices

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Funding for this product was made possible (in part) by Grant No. 1U79SM061233-01 from SAMHSA in partnership with the Monroe County Office of Mental Health and YOUTH POWER! This partnership reflects a collaboration to expand the System of Care approach in counties of Upstate New York. The views expressed in this publication do not reflect the official policies of the United States Department of Health and Human Services; nor does mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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# PART ONE

## Getting Started

### **Are You Ready?**

The first step to youth involvement is to determine if your System of Care (SOC) community is ready for youth guided practices. Think about what you expect from youth, and identify if your adult team can accept youth as partners. By examining your SOC team's values and progress, you can assess your community's readiness for youth guided practices. Overall, your community has to decide if it is ready to take on adult/youth partnerships. This requires an initial meeting with stakeholders to make sure everyone is on board. The team should ask themselves the following questions:

1. Why are we involving young people in decision-making?
2. What will youth involvement mean to our System of Care community?
3. What leadership programs are already in place for youth who are engaged in Systems of Care?
4. As a team are we comfortable with youth being involved as true partners, sharing responsibilities and workload?
5. Are we willing to hold our meetings at a time and place that is accessible to young people?
6. Have we taken adequate time to address the budget and staff considerations of youth involvement?
7. What will the team do with the input we receive from the involved youth? How will we take action?
8. What is our level of commitment?
9. Is everyone on board?
10. What will our orientation training look like for youth and adults?
11. When recruiting partners, do we have a plan that will attract a diverse group of young people?
12. What will be our recruitment criteria?

### **Getting Down to Business: Finding Young People**

Before you can start involving young people in Systems of Care, you have to know how and where to find them. If you are looking for places that are good to recruit from, you have several options:

(NOTE: Before approaching the following individuals/organizations, make sure you have the necessary paperwork to give agencies including Parent and Guardian Release Forms as well as other demographic enrollment forms.

**Your Services:** This is the place to look before anywhere else. There will be youth in your own programs who have lots of potential, and just need opportunity and a little guidance. The youth who are engaged in Systems of Care have a specific expertise to offer. They know what it is like to navigate multiple systems and services. Their insight can help you design and implement innovative and effective programs.

**Schools:** Many school-based programs and clubs empower young people who are engaged in care. By building relationships with programs such as PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support) Project SEARCH, peer mediation, BOCES, etc., you increase the recruiting pool. It is also helpful to reach out to community colleges, universities and disability service offices in schools.

**County Probation Departments:** Reach out to County Probation Departments and inform them of the value of youth groups in the SOC initiative. It is useful to have parents or guardians validate the claims. In a climate of fiscal constraint, probation and other county departments are increasingly reliant upon leveraging resources in the community to reduce recidivism.

**County Social Service Agencies (Department of Mental Health, Department of Social Service, Department of Children, Youth and Families, etc.):** Build relationships with these social service agencies. In some counties, one or more of these entities will lead the Children's Coordinated Service Initiative (CCSI). CCSI works with children and their families who have a history of being hard to place and hard to serve. Partner with these agencies, get involved and make them aware of your youth group.

**Clinics:** Aside from schools, mental health and addiction recovery clinics are another important part of many young adults' lives. A clinic can provide young people with a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

**Residential Facilities:** Many systems-involved youth are placed in residential facilities such as foster care or other out of home placements. In many instances, YOUTH POWER! (YP!) can connect you to youth involvement projects in facilities. For instance, YP! may connect you with a coordinator of a Youth Advisory Council (YAC). YAC's are good resources to contact, as the young participants are already engaged in advisory activities and capacities. Partnering with residential facilities in your community can promote the successful transition of young people back into their home communities.

**Recreation And Mentoring Groups:** Consider leveraging System of Care resources with those of local intervention and prevention programs such as mentoring, sports and other after school activities. Turn to a parent supporter for help contacting leaders of these groups. Once contact has been made, discuss scheduling a time to meet with the youth group and discuss what your group does as well as how you can work together with the established group. Often, local

programs operate on limited budgets and collaboration is enticing. If you need to find disability-gearred groups, you can try [www.findyouthinfo.gov](http://www.findyouthinfo.gov).

**Faith-Based Organizations:** Many young people are active participants in their communities of faith. Through contacting a local priest, minster, rabbi, etc., you can find youth in their places of worship who may be seeking an outlet.

**Family:** If you already have family involvement in your System Of Care community, the children of these parents can be reached out to as well. In addition, local parent groups may know which of their children would be receptive to recruitment for SOC. You can approach the parents through parent advisors. Visit [www.ftnys.org](http://www.ftnys.org) to find contact information for family support leaders in your area.

**Online:** Young people are constantly connected to the Internet. When done correctly, Systems of Care can reach many of them by creating a Facebook page for the county's System of Care community. YOUTH POWER! has an active Facebook presence that engages the Systems of Care demographic. Look to <http://www.facebook.com/YOUTHPOWER.NY> for innovative ways to engage young people through social media. The first step to engaging young people online is by promoting your online presence. You can create a QR code that a young person scans with his or her smart phone and then directs that person to your Systems of Care Facebook page. Increasingly, young people are relying on Facebook and other social media channels to get their news so it is important that you update your Systems of Care page frequently with engaging information and resources. Be certain to create opportunities for authentic online engagement that encourage interaction from your page's followers. You can use Facebook and other social media channels to gather input from young people, publicize artwork and more. By using Internet resources to reach out, you meet the youth at their level, in their comfort zone and show competence in youth culture. You do not need to write in internet shorthand. Deliver the message the way you would if you were writing a typical paper – just make sure that the language you use is youth friendly and accessible to all young people. If you have difficulty navigating this online world, youth who you already recruited can help you put content on certain sites.

## **Starting With a Core Group of Youth**

When recruiting youth, it is good to start out with a group of three to five youth. This core group will be responsible for recruiting other youth similar to themselves and leading the way. Because these young people know what youth like, they can help design promotional materials and other recruitment tools. In addition, they can create applications, determine what to ask in interviews, and guide the selection process.

For some communities this core group of youth is easy to find. In others, it may be a challenge. Create a short list of talking points that express your vision of youth involvement. Ensure that leaders of your community are well versed in these talking points and that they buy into the concept of youth engagement. It is important that you inform providers, community partners, and parents of your youth involvement goals. Parents, mentors and social workers are

essential allies in getting the word out to potential young leaders. They can provide the extra encouragement a young person may need to get involved.

Visit with existing youth leadership programs you have identified in your Systems of Care and let them know of the opportunity to get involved. Refine your message to include the benefits for the individuals and the broader community. Pass out information and if possible, collect contact information of those who seem interested. Once your core group is in place, finding and involving other youth will be easier.

## **Explaining SOC to Youth**

An explanation of Systems of Care and its values should be provided both before and after recruitment. Before the youth is fully on board, the basics should be explained in language that is as plain as possible. Avoid jargon and terminology unfamiliar to young people.

You can make Systems of Care relevant by discussing services you know the young people are engaged in. For instance, if you are meeting with a foster care leadership team, use examples that are common for youth in care. You may want to develop skits that illustrate service coordination before and after the Systems of Care framework is adopted. Describe how Systems of Care will improve lives by coordinating the systems young people use.

When a young person is fully on board, you can go more in depth and explain how the SOC grant operates, but without giving too many confusing details. Also, give definitions for unfamiliar terms like “Technical Assistance” or “Learning Collaborative.” Develop a tip sheet that includes definitions of terms and acronyms that are commonly used in your community.

## **What Are Some Recruitment Strategies?**

There are several techniques and strategies used in the art of youth recruitment.

- Hold a recruitment event that is entertaining, engaging, and explains the opportunities and expectations of your youth involvement initiative. Get people excited about what it means to have a youth guided System of Care.
- Make up a flyer or brochure to grab young people’s attention. Promote the activity as something new and exciting. A flyer or brochure should include the group’s name, meeting times and locations, the group’s purpose, and the benefits of joining. Try to use as few words as possible and include graphics. This is a good task to delegate to your core group of youth.
- Try using media that will appeal to youth. This includes videos, music and graphics. The more modern and tech-savvy you can appear, the better. More of this is discussed in Part Three: Engaging Youth Long Term.
- Arrange major recruitment campaigns during fall and spring with youth designing and leading them.

- Take advantage of resources youth use such as bulletin boards and school and group newsletters. Try running articles in school or college papers, especially in schools with a large population of students with disabilities.
- Make youth involvement seem “trendy.” You can emphasize the people who became successful through participating in programs such as yours.
- Bear in mind that youth can be very busy with school, part-time jobs, sports teams and dealing with life’s ups and downs. It is important to keep things flexible if you want youth recruits.
- Be sure to have clear expectations of what you want from the youth. There should be no confusion on this. It is also important for the youth to know how to properly give input.
- Keep a focus on diversity as you recruit. This will be discussed in more detail in Part Four: Cultural Competence and Youth.
- Educate on the youth movement and the results of civic activism. It is important for young people to learn about the disability rights movement so they can understand their rights to accommodations and break down the stigma attached to disability. A **Disability Timeline** is located at <http://www.nclid-youth.info/index.php?id=61>
- Youth are attracted to success and being able to see for themselves that a process works. Put together a presentation demonstrating the successes of other SOC communities.

## **Incentives for Youth: Tangible or Intangible?**

Most of the people engaged in building Systems of Care are doing so as paid employees of an organization. It is important to consider building in paid positions for young leaders of the Systems of Care initiative. However, it is unlikely that you will be able to pay every young person who you invite to participate in leadership opportunities.

Young people need to feel that by helping to guide Systems of Care, they are making a difference in their community as well as advancing their personal futures. Guiding systems of care is challenging and each meeting and event should be empowering, engaging and fun.

Emphasize intangible rewards like social time and peer support, skill building, work readiness and resume writing. These are skills young people can use in their every day life. Many young people will value this opportunity as they build a life as young adults. Consider how to “acknowledge” and “celebrate” their work and involvement at each meeting. Providing food at meetings like pizza or subs is a very good idea. People engage more when they are not hungry.

When using tangible rewards like stipends and gift cards, consider how sustainable they will be. If the incentives run out, you will not only disappoint the youth but have little money to actually operate. It is often difficult for youth groups to overcome the loss of payment when it was a major incentive to participate.



# PART TWO

## Icebreakers and Activities

Now that you have youth as a part of your team, it is time to educate them on Systems of Care values and processes and develop their leadership skills, as well as set the tone for the group and introduce everyone. A good way to accomplish these tasks is through using interactive activities. An activity will hold a youth's attention longer than a straight presentation and make SOC work "fun". In addition, activities can build rapport and trust among team members. A good game will raise confidence in a team and build relationships.

### Icebreakers

The purpose of an icebreaker is to get everyone acquainted with everyone else to make interactions smoother. Here are some fun icebreakers you can try:

**Question Ball:** The purpose of this game is for everyone around the table to feel comfortable with each other. Sharing small things about each other will make it easier to share more complicated problems.

- Take a soccer or beach ball and write questions on it (Questions should be youth friendly- ex. What is your favorite movie? , What places have you traveled? , Do you have any pets?).
- Gather everyone around in a circle
- The group leader should now hold the ball and toss it to someone else in the circle
- Whoever catches the ball has to answer one of the questions
- Go around the circle until everyone has had the opportunity to get the ball and answer a question

**The M&M Game:** The purpose of this game is for everyone to get to know each other and create a calm atmosphere.

- The facilitator should take a bag of M&M's and count the number of different colors in the bag
- For each color of M&M's assign a question
- Sit participants in a circle
- Pass the bag of M&M's around and have everyone take a piece and answer the question that is assigned to the color of the piece they have chosen

**Common Ground:** The purpose of this game is for everyone around the table to connect with other people around similar experiences.

- Gather all participants in a circle while sitting in chairs
- Get a volunteer to stand in the center of the circle



- The volunteer then says something about themselves to everyone else in the group (ex. My favorite color is blue, I am wearing black shoes)
- Whoever shares the same qualities as the person in the middle gets up and changes seats (No one is allowed to move into the seat directly next to them)
- Whoever is left without a seat stays in the middle and repeats the process

**The Name Game:** This game is helpful for everyone to remember names.

- Everyone in the team gathers around a circle
- The first person in the circle says their name
- The second person says the name of the first person, then says their name
- The third person says the name of the first and second person, then their own
- Each person in the circle continues the pattern
- The last person will have to say the name of everyone around the circle and finish with their own

## **Energizers**

When you need to get your group a little more pepped up, using an energizer is the way to go. These activities get the blood flowing, increase participant energy and make them willing to work. Energizers are to be used if a team seems to be bored, tired or in a grumpy mood. If you are looking for an energizer, try these:

**Sardines:** This is to be played in a large location.

- Someone from the group is identified to be “it.” This can be by random selection or however you wish to do so
- Once a person is identified, everyone else in the group finds a hiding place
- The person who is “it” must find another member of the team
- When another member of the team is found, both will proceed to find other members
- The game is completed when the entire team has found each other

**Pass The Can:**

- All members form a circle
- With any safe object available, the team passes the object around the circle
- No one is allowed to use their hands or drop the can
- Once the can has gone around the circle, the activity is complete

**Catch the Ball:**

- Everyone in the team is assigned a number
- One person in the team starts with a soft ball naming their number
- That person must then call another person’s number and throw them the ball
- If there is hesitation or the ball drops the person is out. Once people begin to be out of the game the numbers will become harder to remember

### **Please, Please Smile:**

- Members sit in a circle facing each other
- One person stands in the middle and picks a person from the team to approach and say “Honey, will you please smile”
- The member sitting on the chair must try their best to restrain from smiling, laughing, smirking or moving the corners of their mouth
- The person in the middle must then try to do everything they can to make someone in the team laugh
- Whoever laughs or smirks first switches places with the person in the middle

### **Charades:**

- The team breaks up into two groups
- One person from each team goes up at a time
- The person who is in front of everyone thinks of something to act as (ex. an animal, a car, a fan, etc.)
- The opposite group must guess what that person is acting out
- If they group doesn't get it the actors group members get a chance to identify the act
- For every correct interpretation of an act each group gets a point
- Whichever group has the most points win

### **The ABC Game:**

- Everyone in the group stands in a circle with their eyes closed
- One person at a time, the team must go through the alphabet in order
- No one can repeat a letter or say it at the same time. If that happens, everyone must start over

## **Trust Exercises**

A trust exercise will make everyone more comfortable with each other and facilitate camaraderie. You can use these exercises:

**Line up Game:** For this game, everyone must close his or her eyes. No one is allowed to talk, and everyone must line up from oldest to youngest. If two or more people are the same age they must be in ascending birthdays. They can also line up with other factors, like birth month or first letter of middle name.

**Trust Circle:** For this game, the players form a circle. Each player should be in a spotting stance. One person is in the center and is a “faller”. Everyone has to close in once the faller has entered the circle. Give everyone the opportunity to be a “faller” and make sure the faller falls in all directions.

# Trainings

YOUTH POWER! offers multiple educational trainings for young people and adult allies.

**Trainings for Youth:** YP! has a full training menu listed at <http://www.youthpowerny.org/training/>. The menu ranges from Empowerment Workshops to Peer Advocacy Trainings. Most trainings can be delivered at no cost to the organization. Contact your Regional Youth Partner to learn more.

**Trainings for Adults:** YP! offers trainings for adult partners on how to maintain and strengthen intergenerational relationships. Trainings for adult partners prepare adults and their organizations for increasing youth involvement in governance and decision making processes. Such trainings include Youth Culture, Youth-Adult Partnerships, and Organizational Youth Engagement. You can find more info on these trainings at [www.youthpowerny.org](http://www.youthpowerny.org), or by emailing [info@youthpowerny.org](mailto:info@youthpowerny.org).

Additionally, YOUTH POWER! organizes webinars on topics such as youth/adult partnerships, peer support, systems advocacy, and self-advocacy. Subscribe to the YP! monthly eNewsletter for announcements or visit the YP! website.

**The following are a list of curricula that YP! frequently refers people and agencies to:**

**Reap What You Sow Curriculum:** Developed by the National Youth Leadership Network, this is a hands-on curriculum that teaches young people how to set goals, build a support system (a network of people in your life who support you), and find community and power. It takes 25 hours to complete and can be done over months or days. To use this curriculum, contact the National Youth Leadership Network through the form at <http://www.nyln.org/resources-3/reap-what-you-sow-curriculum/>.

The adult facilitator will need to go through the Reap What You Sow curriculum training before using it with young people. For more on the curriculum, see the info packet at <http://www.nyln.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Reap-What-You-Sow-Curriculum-Packet.pdf>.

**Building Bridges** has a variety of tip sheets and resource guides for family and youth involvement including a guide called "Promoting Youth Engagement in Residential Settings" Visit the following link to discover the resources at <http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org/workgroups/youth-family/products-resources>.

**Conferences and Webinars:** Attending these trainings are useful in learning more about youth involvement. Conferences can include the Annual Families Together Conference, Families Together's Annual Legislative Awareness Day, and YOUTH POWER!'s Regional and Statewide youth leadership development trainings and youth involvement forums. Always be on the lookout for relevant conferences to attend. To learn about Families Together in New York State's events, visit [www.ftnys.org](http://www.ftnys.org). Through its eNewsletter, YP! promotes conferences pertinent to the Systems of Care community. To join the YP! eNewsletter, sign up through the homepage at [www.youthpowerny.org](http://www.youthpowerny.org).

To avoid traveling, many agencies and organizations host educational webinars, such as those presented by the TA Partnership. A webinar is a live presentation that occurs over the internet using a program that requires participants to have access to high-speed internet, and usually possess headphones and speakers. Additionally, certain webinars allow participants to join the call through a telephone connection. These sessions can be just as useful as in person conferences. Youth M.O.V.E National Youth Advocacy Webinar Series includes examples of useful webinars, which are available for download at the following link:

<http://www.youthmovenational.org/youth-advocacy-webinar-series..>

Other Youth M.O.V.E National webinars can be accessed through [www.youthmovenational.org](http://www.youthmovenational.org) or by contacting Youth M.O.V.E. National at 1-800-580-6199. Remember that even if a webinar has already been presented live, you can still view it archived.

Additionally, YP! frequently hosts and publicizes youth engagement related webinars on topics such as youth/adult partnerships, youth culture, and how to properly train young people. Look on [www.youthpowerny.org](http://www.youthpowerny.org), visit the YOUTH POWER! Facebook page, or contact [info@youthpowerny.org](mailto:info@youthpowerny.org) for details.

## **Leadership Exercises**

It is important for youth to develop leadership skills, and these exercises can help.

**Who's At Your Table?:** This exercise begins with a discussion of how leaders need good role models and mentors. Discuss how, just like a large organization or company has a Board of Directors to lead it, a good leader surrounds him or herself with people who can help on the leadership journey. Ask the youth to create their own "Board of Directors" and identify the people who help them on their journey. The people can be living or deceased, or even a pet. If you have time, have each youth share who they picked and why.

**Pride Lines:** For this activity, ask the youth to finish sentences as the following:

- I am proud that on my own I can...
- I am proud that when I am scared I...
- I am proud that I made a friend happy by...
- I am proud of what I did about....
- I am proud that I keep healthy by...

**In This Group:** The purpose of this simple exercise is to help groups assess their interactions, working styles, and challenges. Each group member is given six questions to answer. It is best that the participants write down their answers before discussing them. The questions are:

- The thing I like most about this group is...
- The thing I like least about this group is...
- One thing I'd really like to see us accomplish this year is...
- As a group, we need...
- One thing I would like to change about this group is...
- One thing I would personally like to get out of being involved in this group is....

# PART THREE:

## Engaging Youth Long Term

Using strategies to find and recruit young people isn't enough. There are also skills to learn for involving youth over a long period of time. Building lasting, important relationships with young people is how you best get the most out of youth.

### Hart's Ladder: Just How Involved are the Young People You Work With?

To measure just how involved youth are in your decision making process, take a look at Hart's Ladder of Youth Involvement. This ladder originated with the United Nations and has been used by many organizations including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). There are several youth involvement levels, ranging from situations where youth are powerless, to situations where youth run and direct everything themselves. Use this ladder to decide both where your organization currently is and where it should be.



View of Youth Involvement	Outcome	Steps of the Ladder
<b>Youth as Objects</b> Adults know what is best for young people.	Involves youth in adult-controlled situations at the discretion of adults. Young people's contributions are insignificant and underutilized. Young people maintain a powerless position.	1. Manipulation 2. Decoration 3. Tokenism
<b>Youth as Recipients</b> Adults view youth participation as an experience that will be good for them.	Creates an opportunity for young people to learn from the adult experts, which will help them when they become adult contributors.	4. Assigned and informed 5. Consulted and informed 6. Adult initiated, shared decisions with youth
<b>Youth as Partners</b> Adults view youth as important contributors	Encourages youth to become involved in all aspects of the organization, group, or project. Youth and adults share power and are equal partners in decision-making. Both bring strengths, abilities, and expertise to the table. The system of care is youth-guided.	7. Youth and adult initiated and directed 8. Youth initiated, shared decisions with adults 9. Youth initiated and directed

# Understanding Youth Culture

Youth culture can be vastly different from what adults would expect. Youth culture needs to be understood and embraced if you are to have a trusting relationship with the young people you work with. Here are some key points about youth culture, provided by *Culture Shock: Youth Culture 101*, a YOUTH POWER! workshop. If you would like to request the full presentation, you may do so by contacting [info@youthpowerny.org](mailto:info@youthpowerny.org).

**Prominence of Technology:** As stated previously, young people spend considerable time on the internet, cell phones, etc. Online sites are now a big social outlet for youth. Facebook and texting have replaced snail-mail and passing notes. It is important to understand some of the youth-technology lingo.

Chatspeak/Lolspeak/SMS-Speak: Using internet shorthand when typing or texting. Example: "I went 2 da store 4 sum gr8 ice cream lol". This means "I went to the store for some great ice cream."

Trolling: Saying offensive/hateful things on the internet to get a reaction.

Forum: Usually refers to a type of online message/bulletin board (different forums attract different groups of people: gamers, artists, hackers, anime followers, cooks, etc.). Advertise in different places to find different types of people.

YouTube: A website designed for posting videos.

Social-networking sites: Websites with the intended purpose of connecting and communicating such as Facebook, Vine, Instagram, Twitter, Google Plus, etc. These sites can be used to make a profile page for your SOC community, as well as connect with other Systems of Care communities and similar youth groups. Find YOUTH POWER! on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/YOUTHPOWER.NY>. Note that a Facebook page is not the same as a website and both need to be consistently updated, monitored and moderated.

Smartphone: A cell phone that can be used to access the internet and other applications.

4chan: a very popular and controversial forum. It is where many memes originate. A meme is often a silly internet trend. Examples include "Rickrolling" (tricking someone into watching Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up"), and "Lolcats" (pictures of cats with broken English captions), and Advice animals (pictures captioned in funny, witty or entertaining ways. Sometimes they will include animals or advice).

It is a good idea to familiarize oneself with online resources young people use, as it is good not only for recruiting but also for keeping tabs on what youth need in youth/adult partnerships.

**Subcultures:** There are many different subcultures that young people are able to belong to. Subcultures in youth culture are informed by things such as clothing, art, television, movies, music, internet and video games. If you recruit a young person representing one or more subcultures, be respectful of how that person identifies and refrain from thinking of it as a "phase." Listed below are a few subcultures popular among young people:

"Hipsters": Those who are progressive seek to be "different."

"Skaters": Sporty-types, primarily who enjoy skateboards.



“Punks”: Often dress in dark clothing with chains.

“Rockers”: Who enjoy rock music.

## **Adult Partners**

While there are some youth who arrive at the table fully prepared, others may need the help of an adult partner. Usually the coordinator of the meeting serves as an adult ally, but other adults can be brought in as well. A good adult ally understands how the importance of youth feedback works toward engaging youth in decision-making processes by acknowledging youth input and validating the thoughts and feelings youth share. For example, if youth are not actively participating in a discussion, the adult ally will try to engage them by directing questions to them. The adult ally will also ensure the youth get ample “air time” and are not interrupted or spoken over. An adult ally is someone who advocates for youth voice and the importance of youth involvement at all times. Make sure to remember that the adult ally is not a replacement for the youth advocate but is just there to help them out.

## **Meeting Tips**

Meetings for system-involved youth can and will differ from meetings for adults in terms of pace, tone, setting and other factors.

**Be Flexible With Scheduling:** As mentioned in chapter one, young people are busier than ever. Because of this, meetings need to be scheduled carefully as not to interfere with already prioritized activities in a young person’s life. You may need to schedule meetings at times you normally would not. Survey the group to find out what time everyone is available. Oftentimes this may be in the evening or on weekends. Anecdotally, YP! has found that young people are most often available in the evening. Additionally, youth need ample notice of meetings due to how busy they are. Another important aspect of scheduling meetings is sending out reminders to youth via email, Facebook, phone calls or text, as youth often are overwhelmed and may not remember exact dates. Be ready to edit your schedule and do work at times that you may not have before to make sure that you can get youth involved. Over time, the young members of the group can take responsibility for scheduling meetings, developing the agendas and sending out reminders.

**Provide Accommodations:** There may be youth needing reasonable accommodations because of a disability or for other reasons.

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, a “reasonable accommodation” is “any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions.” For instance, someone on the team may have fine motor impairment and may need a note taker, assistive technology or the ability to make audio recordings of meetings. Others may need a break during long meetings if they have Attention Deficit Disorder and cannot sit still for extended periods of time. Remember that just because a disability may be invisible does not mean someone will not need accommodations. Offer options to the group, such as a ten minute break half-way through or making sure everyone knows it is okay to ask for a break. You can also use energizers, as mentioned previously, to re-engage the group.

Aside from disability issues, accommodations can be used to make meetings more “youth-friendly.” One accommodation that can be used for this purpose is a breakdown list of



acronyms, so as not to confuse youth who have not heard certain acronyms before. Such acronyms may include the following:

<b>CCSI:</b>	Coordinated Children's Service Initiative
<b>CASSP:</b>	Children and Adolescent Service System Program
<b>DOL:</b>	Department of Labor
<b>HCBS:</b>	Home and Community Based Services
<b>ILC:</b>	Independent Living Center
<b>OASAS:</b>	Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services
<b>OCFS:</b>	Office of Children and Family Services
<b>OMH:</b>	Office of Mental Health
<b>OPWDD:</b>	Office of Persons With Developmental Disabilities
<b>SOC:</b>	Systems of Care
<b>SED:</b>	State Education Department or Serious Emotional Disturbance
<b>SPOA:</b>	Single Point of Access

**Keep it Slow:** Fast-paced meetings are difficult for youth who may need to take their time and/or have visual/auditory processing issues. Youth-friendly meetings are slow-paced meetings.

**Make Materials Simple:** Another way to make things youth-friendly is to make sure materials are in plain language. To test the readability of your materials in Microsoft Word, please do the following:

**Set Up Your Document** (you will just need to do this once)

- Select "Spelling and Grammar"
- Select "Options" at the bottom
- Select "Show Readability Statistics"
- Now it is set!

**To Use It:**

- Complete your document
- Select "Tools"
- Then select 'Spelling and Grammar.' (After checking the spelling and grammar, the program will show the Readability Statistics window at the very end.)
- Your document is ready if the "Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level" is 8.0 or less. It is best to keep it lower than 8.0.

One thing to keep in mind about keeping materials simple is not to use very much jargon at first, and slowly introduce jargon as the young people learn more about Systems of Care values and practices as well as systems lingo. It is also important to remember not to speak in acronyms. If you do use an acronym, make sure to say the word first (example: The Children's Coordinated Service Initiative, also known as CCSI, recommended that youth and young adults be at the table for all major decisions").

**Facilitate Transportation and Allow Youth to Join the Group Virtually:** Transportation is a big issue for young people, especially those who cannot drive and/or cannot use public transportation. Additionally, the public transportation infrastructure in many parts of the state is inadequate or non-existent for young people and their families to travel significant distances. It is important to think about this and build in money to assist with transportation. An alternative to meeting in person is through the use of technologies such as Go-To Meeting. Google Hangouts is another low cost alternative. If your group plans to use technology to assist in meetings,

remember that not all areas of the state have high speed internet and this could create a barrier for certain members. Alternatively, free conference call lines that only require access to a phone line exist as well. However, this is problematic if youth have limited access to the phone or if the cell phone plan has a limited amount of minutes. This can be alleviated by building in stipends for phone cards or given them access to the call through an 800 number. Additionally, check that youth have proper equipment and a quiet place to join the meeting. This is especially important for youth in residential facilities. Be sure to check the specific rules and regulations if youth are participating from within institutionalized settings.

**Youth Involvement in Rural Communities:** Promoting and implementing youth involvement in rural communities poses unique challenges. Resources are limited, locations are remote and the culture of rural communities differs from more populated areas. The following tips offer solutions to engage young people, their loved ones and providers in rural communities. Remember that all communities are important, no matter the geography

#### **WHERE TO START?**

The first step to increasing youth involvement and establishing a foothold in your rural communities is to do some research and look at your community's demographics. What percentage of the population is under 24? A good resource to determine this is the Kids Wellbeing Indicators Clearinghouse (KWIC) which can be found on the New York State Council on Children and Families website at [www.ccf.ny.gov](http://www.ccf.ny.gov). This tool is thorough and provides insight about county level demographics in New York State. The more youth there are in a rural area, the more likely the whole community will be receptive to heightened youth involvement and implementing SOC values. Note emigration/immigration dynamics of these areas, as well as economic trends...

- ❖ *Are a lot of youth leaving the area or coming in?*
- ❖ *Is the area gaining or losing jobs?*
- ❖ *Is there a lot of development going on, or is the economy mainly farms and local businesses?*
- ❖ *Does the area have any natural attractions or other elements that draw tourism?*

This will clue you in to how the area approaches progress and change. If a lot of youth are leaving town, then you know it will be more of a challenge introducing SOC values to the community!

## **Youth and Strategic Sharing**

Strategic sharing is a great advocacy tool for youth. Initially, strategic sharing was a model developed by the Casey Foundation and the Foster Youth Alumni for youth in foster care to learn how to share their stories in a safe and meaningful way for themselves and their audiences. Since then, it has become known widely and adopted across-systems and has implications for any youth in any system to learn how to share their story.

The major concepts of strategic sharing help young people explore the risks for sharing their stories, different audiences they may share in front of, and identifying what statements are appropriate to share and when.

It is encouraged that adults teach young people this method in fun and interactive ways. There are also available resources that can help youth process this method individually.

There are links to strategic sharing resources in the “Youth Guided SOC Resources” section of this tool kit.

## **One-To-One Youth Engagement**

Long-term youth engagement does not just apply to the group as a whole: attention has to be devoted to the individual as well. A solid adult/youth partnership is built on trust and equality. An adult who mentors a young person will need to learn proper skills for helping that young person reach his or her fullest potential. The following is taken from the YOUTH POWER! Ready To Achieve Mentoring Program (RAMP) Training Manual, compiled by Zach Garafalo. RAMP is a high-tech, career focused mentoring program for young people with disabilities. RAMP is funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and led by the Institute for Educational Leadership.

**What makes a good mentor?:** A mentor needs to have mutual respect and trust with their mentee. Regular interaction and support (being there for the mentee) are essential. A good mentor, aside from guiding the mentee through the Systems of Care implementation process, helps a young person with specific goals and skill-building such as building organizational skills and improving communication. You need to listen to the youth recruits as well as prepare them for the future.

**Knowing the mentee:** It is important to take the time to actually know your youth recruits. When attempting to gain insight into the youth’s world, avoid asking them yes or no questions about their interests and goals. For instance, instead of “Do you like school?” you can ask an open-ended question such as “What do you like in school?”. This will help the youth open up and become more receptive. In addition, you should be easygoing, go with the flow, and try not to sound like an interrogator. Sounding like a police or probation officer will only scare the youth. Paying attention to pitch and volume change is also essential, since it often indicates emotion and authority.

**How to approach the mentor-mentee relationship:** There are several guidelines to follow for a successful relationship. One very important tip is to acknowledge the strengths of your mentees. This tells your mentee that you believe in them. Offering praise and encouragement for success is key to continued involvement. There also has to be mutual respect between mentor and mentee if there is going to be a positive relationship. While being strength-based is already one of the key Systems of Care values, it is especially important in terms of mentoring young people. Recognizing each youth as an individual and utilizing their unique abilities is also important. Combining these philosophies will bring out the best in the youth recruits.

**Raising self-esteem:** Youth with high self-esteem will function better. One thing the adult needs to do is be a friend and stress that the young person’s role is important. Youth will be empowered when they hear this.

**What NOT to do:** Following the strength-based value means avoiding certain topics and tendencies. Avoid setting unrealistic expectations. This can be easy to do by thinking about when you were a youth and what you could handle. Also avoid criticizing the family of the youth, prying into a youth’s personal business, sharing too much of your own personal business, passing judgment on the youth, and excessive use of the word “should”.

# Starting a Youth Advisory Council (YAC)

Starting a youth advisory council or YAC is a great way to engage youth and maximize youth involvement. Here are a few tips in getting your YAC up and running!

- First, address your organizational readiness. It is important for the adult partners to be ready to work with youth in this capacity. YOUTH POWER! has assessments available that can help your organization to accomplish this. Visit us at [www.youthpowerny.org](http://www.youthpowerny.org).
- Next, write a clear scope of work for the YAC. It is important to have a clear vision and purpose to guide the work of the council.
- Next, recruit and identify a core group of youth or youth leaders.
- Continue to recruit and raise awareness about the group. Gain the support and buy-in or other localities to help with recruitment and sustainability.
- Give ownership of the YAC to the youth. Assist them when needed.
- Encourage the YAC to create a name for their YAC.
- Assist the YAC, when necessary, in developing their structure and governance (including: mission, bylaws, group agreements etc.)
- Work with the YAC to identify focus areas and projects.
- Provide continuous support.

YOUTH POWER! can provide Technical Assistance to your organization to help build and sustain a YAC. Visit our website to get in contact with a Regional Youth Partner near you!

## Recognizing Youth

Recognizing the accomplishments of youth recruits is essential to engaging them over the long term. Youth who are praised and encouraged to feel special will be even more enthusiastic about giving input. You can try having a “recognition night” for youth, as well as running ads in the newspaper recognizing them and nominating especially devoted youth for youth community service awards.

## Part Four: Cultural Competence and Youth

The Systems of Care value of cultural competence is crucial to youth involvement. Young people involved with Systems of Care hail from a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities, and all backgrounds can be useful. In addition, the culture and values of a young person and their family and must be respected if they are to be utilized to their full potential.

### Variety in Recruitment

As mentioned in part one, when you recruit youth it is important to understand that there are a variety of racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Social class and gender are also important. A council that is overly dominant in one gender, ethnicity, race, or social class will not be as effective because it will lack the differing perspective of different demographics. A youth from one race, sexual orientation, or social class will bring different insight on an issue’s importance than that of a young person with different experiences. To obtain this variety, you can try

making an effort to recruit from under-represented areas and ensuring nothing in your promotional material could be considered intolerant or offensive.

If you are not sure if something will be perceived as ageist, racist, classist, or homophobic, consult the core group of youth. What is considered offensive changes from generation to generation, as well as from community to community.

## **Asking Young People about Their Culture**

While it may be difficult to talk about, it is often necessary to ask youth about their belief systems, family composition, race, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnic origin. This is true for nearly every youth regardless of their racial, cultural or ethnic background. There may be significant pieces of information about a young person and their beliefs, values and routines that you will be missing by just interpreting a young person's particular culture at face value.

To gather info on a youth's culture, ask the following questions:

- How do you identify yourself?
- Were your parents born in the United States? Is your family from this area of the state originally?
- What language is most frequently spoken at home?
- How long have you lived here?
- Do you feel different? If you do, how do you cope?

In addition to these questions, it is also important to ask about dietary restrictions (ex: Halal or Kosher), clothing customs (ex: burqa or hijab) and anything a youth may find culturally important. For instance, offering pepperoni pizza or meat subs as the only food offering may not be appropriate for some youth. Another point to keep in mind is family culture. Be flexible with this and remember: Just because a youth says or does something that seems unusual to you does not mean it's wrong.

## **Some “Keep-in-Minds” of Cultural Competence**

- Just because a youth speaks English well does not mean his or her family will. Young people pick up language more quickly than adults especially if they are enrolled in schools or programs with English speaking peers and instruction.
- Youth often have a different interpretation of their culture than adults. Do not assume that because a youth is of a certain religion/ethnicity/etc. that he or she shares all of the customs and beliefs. For example, it should not be assumed that if a young person is raised in a Christian household that he or she will adhere to the teachings of that particular faith. In fact, it is quite possible that a young person may rebel against traditional doctrine during adolescence.
- Many cultures have different ideas of what “youth” is. In some cultures, an individual can be considered an adult as early as age 13 or at puberty. In others, one can be considered a youth into his or her 30's. This is also true across New York State. Different parts of the state are more receptive to youth voice than others.

- Some cultures value youth input more than others. In some cultures, youthfulness is revered. In others, youthfulness is seen as having little value with adults or the elderly having the highest respect.

# Youth Guided SOC RESOURCES

*Building Bridges Initiative – Tips for building and sustaining a Youth Advisory Council.*

<http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org/sites/default/files/BBI%20Youth%20Advisory%20Council%20Tip%20Sheet%20rev%2011-13.pdf>

*Generation Rx Tool Kits - Ohio State University, College of Pharmacy toolkit to teach college and high school students about prescription drug use.*

<https://pharmacy.osu.edu/outreach/generation-rx-toolkits>

*Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer and Not Worth the Risk – Even If It’s Legal - National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE), toolkits to keep teens safe from prescription drugs.*

[www.talkaboutrx.org/maximizing\\_role.jsp](http://www.talkaboutrx.org/maximizing_role.jsp)

*Strategic Sharing: Resources to help young people understand the major concepts of Strategic Sharing and its implementation.*

[http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info\\_services/download/StrategicSharing.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/StrategicSharing.pdf)

[http://files.www.cmhnetwork.org/news/Youth\\_MOVE-NC\\_Strategic\\_Sharing\\_Information\\_Sheet.pdf](http://files.www.cmhnetwork.org/news/Youth_MOVE-NC_Strategic_Sharing_Information_Sheet.pdf)

*Strategic Sharing Workbook: Youth Voice in Advocacy - A workbook developed to guide individuals who have experienced traumatic life experiences and are interested in sharing their stories in an effort to promote change. This can be used by individual youths or adult allies working with youth or youth groups.*

<http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbStrategicSharingGuide.pdf>

*YOUTH M.O.V.E. – A youth led national organization that works as a diverse collective to unite the voices and causes of youth while raising awareness around youth issues. We will advocate for youth rights and voice in mental health and the other systems that serve them, for the purpose of empowering youth to be equal*



*partners in the process of change. Includes many resources and opportunities for involvement.*

<http://www.youthmovenational.org/>

*Mental Health First Aid - Mental Health First Aid is an in-person training that teaches you how to help adults or youth developing a mental illness or in a crisis. Youth MHFA is available for to teach parents, family members, caregivers, teachers, school staff, peers, neighbors, health and human services workers, and other caring citizens how to help an adolescent who is experiencing a mental health or addictions challenge or is in crisis. Learn more or schedule a training at [www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org](http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org)*

*National YOUTH MOVE Definition- <http://wvsystemofcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Youth-Guided-Definition-YouthMOVE.pdf>*

*West Virginia Youth Guided tools, trainings and how to's-  
<http://youthmovewv.com> <http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org/products/tip-sheets> <http://www.itsmymove.org/index.php>*

*YOUTH GUIDE to treatment Planning (WV)*

*<http://wvsystemofcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Youth-Guide-to-Treatment-Planning-Grealish-2011.pdf>*

*Young Adult Facilitator's Handout for the Virtual National Event (YOUTH MOVE NATIONAL)*

*<http://www.youthmovenational.org/images/downloads/YoungAdultCommunityConversationFacilitatorsGuideSocialConnectedness.pdf>*

*Trauma Informed Method of Engagement (YOUTH MOVE National)*

*<http://www.youthmovenational.org/images/downloads/TIMEModelforYouthEngagementFinalPresentationSlides.pdf>*

*Integrating "Youth Guided" and "Cultural Linguistic Competence" Values into Systems of Care*

[http://www.tapartnership.org/docs/0782\\_Integrating\\_v4b.pdf](http://www.tapartnership.org/docs/0782_Integrating_v4b.pdf)

[\*Youth Adult Partnerships in Systems of Care\*](#)

<http://www.tapartnership.org/docs/Youth%20Adult%20Partnerships%20Guide.pdf>

[\*The National Directory of Family- run & Youth guided organizations for Children's Behavioral Health\*](#)

<http://familyorgdirectory.fmhi.usf.edu/>

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