

THE VALUE OF YOUTH-LED PROGRAMS

Youth are leading the way for positive community change and youth-led programs (YLP) are making it possible. Youth-led programs encourage young people to actively look at their surroundings, gather information, and then address community topics that are relevant to their lives. YLP provide a platform to effectively engage youth voice and youth action, equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to impact their community. This approach advances the inclusion of young people in the planning and development of initiatives, programs, and policies that affect their community.

Youth-led programs are for all youth. All young people, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation, are capable of contributing to their communities. The nature of YLP places young people, from all types of backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences, into active roles to affect positive change in their community environments. This inclusive, empowering approach provides young people with opportunities to develop critical knowledge, skills and attitudes while impacting their communities. YLP can be implemented in all geographic contexts (e.g. rural, urban, suburban).

OUR PROCESS

Experiential learning, or learning by doing, is a key ingredient in the process of YLP. Through investigation of local data and by considering community resources, youth gain a deeper awareness and understanding of community issues and the factors that lead to those issues. Youth then identify and implement the most appropriate prevention strategies that will positively impact the issue.

Fulton County's Youth Advisory Council (YAC) is one example of a youth-led program. Guided by adult allies (the term used to describe adults who facilitate youth-led programs), YAC members collected and analyzed existing data from their community and identified youth vape use as their issue of focus. While reviewing data they made a surprising discovery; while youth perceptions of their peers' vape use, was high, actual vape use among youth was only 17% of 6th through 12th graders in the county. The YAC learned that the majority of youth in their community did not vape. Based on this information, YAC created a social norming campaign to correct misperceptions about the number of youth vaping in the community. To reach their priority population of middle school and high school youth, they chose to utilize messaging and popular memes from youth culture, developing their final product with peer feedback. YAC members ran their ads in movie theaters throughout the summer, as many youth in the community enjoy watching films during that time of year (Dixon & Thomas, 2019). As the example demonstrates, YLP engage young people in the community differently than simply volunteer work. The young people that participate in YLP engage in strategic planning and have a heightened sense of how their joint actions are intended to affect issues in the community.

While young people lead each step of this process, the guidance and support of adult allies is critical. Indeed, the adult ally is an integral piece in YLP. The principles of an unbiased, candid, objective and collaborative relationship between youth and adult allies provide a culture that furnishes youth with a foundation for skill-building and a belief in the importance of their work (Zeldin et al., 2008). Adult guided environments are structured, supportive and provide space for youth-directed conversations and collaboration as youth address the topics important to them as members of a larger community. By engaging with young people in this manner, adult allies help youth build a sense of belonging and purpose in their community. An adult ally's guidance is essential to enhance the youth voice within a community.

HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM YLP

Young people benefit from participating in youth-led programs, regardless of their previous leadership experience. YLP are unique in that they engage youth as resources and contributors in their communities (Collura et al., 2019). Through their participation, a young person's leadership skills are enhanced; they become confident in their ability to influence others and speak in public. For example, when asked, "What does YLP mean to you?" Erion, from the Ironton High School YLP team, responded: "YLP help inform and improve things (problems or roadblocks) that need attention in our school or community. Through my involvement in YLP, I feel much more comfortable talking with people. [YLP] help me stand firm on my choices and gives me a place to learn and grow leadership skills." As we experience an expanding cultural divide in our country, leadership development at the community-level becomes increasingly critical. Being able to clearly and concisely advocate for yourself and others is also a critical life skill.

In addition to developing leadership skills, young people develop civic skills. In YLP, young people obtain the skills to engage in political and social discussions. Youth learn how to critically analyze their lives and community in relation to larger social, economic and political structures (Zeldin et al., 2008). YLP allow young people to get a glimpse of the world beyond their personal environments of school, family and friendships to provide a broader perspective that the young person may not have received otherwise.

Youth also increase their confidence in their ability to affect change within their schools and communities, both as individuals and as members of a group. They learn how to collaborate and work together in order to impact their communities. They come to "own" their own expertise as community members (Zeldin et al., 2008). Ultimately, young people involved in YLP become well-rounded citizens.

Young people who participate in these programs are also well equipped for the workplace. Through YLP, they develop enhanced resiliency, critical thinking skills and research skills. Youth involved in YLP understand the importance of using data to make informed arguments and decisions. They also understand the importance of deadlines and organization.

HOW COMMUNITIES BENEFIT FROM YLP

Communities are stronger because of YLP. The contribution that youth voice brings to a community, especially in regards to school and community issues, has a positive impact. The efforts young people lead impact outcomes that result in healthier communities for all (Fellows & Jeffers, 2019). When youth are an integral part of the solution, communities are more effective in creating change.

YLP help leadership from different sectors of the community understand the unique perspective that youth bring to the table, as opposed to seeing youth as token members (Collura, et al., 2019). The collaboration between youth and adult allies to solve issues results in a positive shift in the community's perception of youth. Through the process, community members begin to see youth as assets instead of recipients of community services. YLP demonstrate the value of young people to the broader community. This modeling and demonstration is essential to the creation of sustained community support for YLP (Zeldin et. al., 2008).

Communities that embrace YLP have young citizens who develop into more resilient and responsible adults. These adults are more likely to be civically involved and are more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions about community conditions (Zimmerman, 2000; Collura et al., 2019). YLP nurture community connectedness - the feeling of being valued by the community - which also paves a path to healthier communities and individuals. Furthermore, because the YLP process emphasizes evidence-based strategies, former YLP-involved youth are more likely to continue to implement these proven strategies in other aspects of life and community as adults. As citizens of the world, the impact of these youth will last far beyond their time involved in YLP.

INTENTIONAL APPROACH

YLP are supported by research. Adult allies and youth involved in YLP use evidence-based frameworks and strategies to guide their work. Specifically, the Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF) provides adult allies with a format to help young people develop the necessary knowledge, skills and traits to positively change their communities (Holden et al., 2004). The YECF is built on the concept of empowerment, which prepares youth to influence the social and political systems that affect their lives (Talbert, 2017). In addition, the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF; SAMHSA) identifies the strategic planning steps adult allies need to take with youth to guide them in creating positive change. Using these frameworks, youth become engaged in the process of building a critically thought-out plan detailing why, how, where, and when to address the issue of their choosing. Use of these frameworks is essential to the YLP process.

YLP in Ohio are also supported by key state entities. The Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) provides funding to support the development and ongoing work of YLP. Prevention Action Alliance (PAA) acts as a 'hub' that distributes grant funds to local communities with youth-led programs. Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs engages with adult allies to provide structured educational support and learning opportunities. Through the combined efforts of these entities, and in collaboration with adult allies, a collective goal of YLP in Ohio was established: for young people to engage in a data-driven strategic planning process to implement evidenced-based strategies to create community change (Talbert, 2017). Key stakeholders feel it is important to ensure the approach to youth-led programs is consistent across the state, structured, and upheld by research and evidence. As the movement of providing mental health and substance use services is directed outside of public health agencies and into the community (including schools), it is essential that youth, YLP and adult allies be better supported.

SUSTAINABILITY

YLP are sustainable. By investing in youth-led programming, our young people begin to see themselves as active members in their community as they build and recognize skills for the future. As young people become adults, they serve as well-rounded community members and citizens. Some continue this work by serving as adult allies, equipped with the knowledge of what it takes to promote youth involvement in such programs. Not only are YLP sustainable, but the positive growth and community outcomes are as well.

YLP are also cost effective. As adult allies and young people learn and implement the process, the cost to maintain the program is minimal. The primary cost is the time and salaries of the adult allies - a minimal investment when you consider the broader benefits to community health.

CONCLUSION

YLP works. Ohio has grounded YLP in science and theory by identifying evidence-based frameworks, creating state partnerships and engaging key stakeholders. A key component of YLP is experiential learning, which engages young people and adults as partners in a data-driven process to positively impact their surroundings. Young people and communities benefit from YLP through positive youth and community development. YLP are sustainable and cost effective in creating community-level change.

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