

Spotlight Series: YAB Pathways to Leadership

Introduction

The Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) is a national initiative designed to reduce the number of youth experiencing homelessness. Twenty-three communities were selected in Round 3 of YHDP. As a part of this initiative, these communities committed to authentic collaboration with youth and young adults who have lived experience of homelessness. Though every community achieved some level of success with this commitment, Springfield, Massachusetts and Alaska Balance of State (BoS) were standouts in their approach and their ability to sustain meaningful youth involvement throughout the project and during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These two communities are spotlighted below for how they have been able to foster youth leadership, as well as for lessons learned that may provide guidance for other communities seeking to establish effective youth collaboration in their local communities.

Springfield, Massachusetts

Establishing a Youth Action Board (YAB) in Springfield, MA

Springfield, Massachusetts was awarded \$2.43 million of YHDP funding, in Round 3. As of 2018, the estimated population of Springfield was 155,032, making it the third-largest city in Massachusetts and the fourth-most populous city in New England.

True Colors United worked closely with the Youth Action Board (YAB) in Springfield, from board recruitment, through developing board structure and governance, to projects and goal setting. The Continuum of Care (CoC) was receptive of youth collaboration technical assistance and consistently demonstrates a commitment to meaningful youth engagement. Springfield's YAB played a key role in every step of the YHDP process, from systems modeling, assisting with drafting the Coordinated Community Plan (CCP), through application review and project selection. Their next steps include drafting bylaws, connecting with other youth action boards for support and shared resources, and setting goals for continued work with the CoC.

Developments and Challenges in Youth Collaboration and Youth Leadership

The Springfield YAB decided to establish an elected executive committee of their membership. Their executive committee attends larger CoC meetings; reviews and introduces new content or materials to the larger YAB; as well as holds additional planning and strategy meetings. This increased their sense of investment in the work, as well as empowered young leaders who steered the YAB to function relatively well during a public health crisis.

The pandemic abruptly changed how YAB work is conducted in many, if not all, YHDP communities. Springfield was able to adapt to remote work by leveraging the access their youth and young adult partners have to technology (e.g. conference calls, chat groups, online video conferencing, and a private social media group). Youth collaboration remained consistent through the onset of the pandemic, with the YAB involved in the entire Request for Proposals (RFP) process and developing goals to expand YAB membership and virtual reach going forward.

However, the Springfield YAB was delayed in finalizing a mission statement, vision statement, and determined way to govern. As YHDP deadlines approached rapidly, the YAB de-prioritized these key components of structure and governance to focus on meeting those project deadlines. Establishing more structure earlier in the round could have relieved some pressure and provided clarity about how to plan and prioritize their work. Due to COVID-19, Springfield only received one of two planned in-person technical assistance visits for youth collaboration specifically.

Alaska Balance of State

Establishing a Youth Action Board across Alaska

In Alaska BoS, the largest geographic region engaging in YHDP, youth leadership took center stage. After several initial outreach efforts and True Colors United's first visit, the Youth Action Board, despite being newly established, ignited absolute commitment from several young adults for the YHDP process. Two young people in particular, from separate areas in the state, met at the Site Meeting in Juneau and stepped into their power by quickly starting to form the Statewide Youth Alaskan Action Board (YAAB).

True Colors United worked closely with the Youth Action Board in Alaska, including recruitment, governance, mission and vision building, budgeting, and goal setting. The YAAB played a key role in every step of the YHDP process, including system modeling and drafting the Coordinated Community Plan (CCP), developing the Statewide decision-making body, leading the Request for Proposals (RFP) process, conducting consistent outreach and advocacy. They are actively engaged and vocal in weekly calls, on-site meetings, and in every deliverable.

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Developments and Challenges in Youth Collaboration and Youth Leadership

The CoC and Technical Assistance providers offered guidance and a framework for YHDP while the young people immediately began planning outreach to other regions that were not yet at the table. On weekly calls and nearly every meeting, the YAAB consistently pushed the larger community to have conversations around equity regarding Native Alaskan representation, reaching rural villages, LGBTQ+ young people, and more youth voices needing to be heard.

While some of the original statewide YAAB members became unavailable, two remained steady and dedicated. One important moment of engagement was at a meeting when a YAB from a community that had participated in YHDP in an earlier round, organized a meeting with the Statewide YAAB to share their lessons learned with the Alaska Balance of State. Due to external funding advocated by the CoC, the YAAB were given the opportunity to attend this in-person meeting in Anchorage. Those who were able to attend reported being even more inspired by the work of young people who engaged in this process before them. They were fueled by the successes of the earlier YAB who created a team of mobile system navigators, sustainable community ties, and continued advocacy through their ongoing engagement.

YAAB members made the decision to establish an executive committee that differentiated the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the YAAB members based on their level of involvement. While Regional YAAB members are only expected to attend their regional meetings and actively participate more sparsely, Statewide YAAB members are expected to relay the group conscious of their region, actively outreach, plan and strategize for meetings, facilitate regional groups, provide communication reminders, and stay in regular attendance on larger Statewide calls. Because of this, they decided to raise the hourly rate for those who are on the Statewide YAAB to better mirror the value and amount of work they were contributing.

One challenge that arose in this work, particularly when it was just two YAAB members consistently at the table, was some need for facilitated conflict resolution. In several instances, the two YAAB members felt strongly about opposite positions i.e. how much they should be paid and the goal of outreach trips to engage more young people in under-represented regions. Through a few intentional conversations, they found ways to compromise. After consistent outreach efforts by the YAAB members, more young people joined the Statewide YAAB which made making decisions as a group easier since there were more voices, personalities, and people to share the workload. In this process, more young people were also empowered to become regional representatives and take on more leadership roles in YHDP.

Lessons Learned: Recommendations for Youth Collaboration and Leadership

Communities should consider the following ideas to strengthen youth collaboration and promote youth leadership:

- Due to COVID-19, communities should anticipate and budget for supporting the technology needs of Youth Action Boards, in addition to compensation.
- The CoC should ensure funds are allocated for fair compensation of youth action board members, proactively addressing any barriers to disbursement (e.g. will YAB members need to become employees of an organization or contractors/vendors of with county/city in order to be paid?). In recruitment, it's best practice to determine how young people prefer to be paid and clear about how much they will earn for their time and expertise.
- The CoC should be assessed for youth equity, in partnership with an external agency and with feedback from youth/young adults, receiving youth collaboration technical assistance as early in the round as possible.
- Throughout the round, older adult partners should ensure supplemental materials are provided to youth action boards explaining key parts of the process and defining relevant terminology.
- Whenever possible, YABs and/or YAB coordinators should connect with a YAB either in the same region or in a community with a similar size or environment (e.g. urban, suburban, rural). Communication between youth action boards presents opportunities for mutual growth in the way of young people helping their peers troubleshoot or strategize, as well as skill sharing.
- Dedicate significant time for outreach and anticipate some attrition.
- Communities should anticipate supporting conversations around conflict resolution, how to come to a consensus, and how to find mutual compromise.
- Soliciting funding from outside sources can dramatically increase the impact of this work to help sustain the YAB, increase wages to adequately compensate individuals for their time and expertise, and allow them to connect in-person more regularly.
- If there has been any successful Youth-Led work in your community (or nearby), try to arrange an exchange for the YAB to connect and inform each other on lessons learned and how to build off one another's successes.