



Developing and Sustaining a Youth Advisory Council

A National Building Bridges Initiative Tip Sheet

October 2013

Acknowledgments

The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) gratefully acknowledges the support and commitment of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). BBI was initiated and has been sustained through SAMHSA's leadership.



The Building Bridges Initiative would like to acknowledge the support of Magellan Health Services, Inc. Their commitment to BBI principles and practices ensures that the voices of families and youth are foremost in providing guidance to the field to promote successful engagement.



The generosity of SAMHSA and Magellan made the creation of *Developing and Sustaining a Youth Advisory Council* possible. We are deeply appreciative.

The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views, opinions or policies of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration nor the Department of Health and Human Services.

Developing and Sustaining a Youth Advisory Council

Introduction: What is a Youth Advisory Council?

Youth Advisory Councils are a powerful and effective way for residential and community programs to increase youth voice and to move toward operationalizing the principles of youth-guided care. In the context of residential and community programs, a Youth Advisory Council often consists of a lead youth peer advocate and youth members who are currently receiving services. It is also helpful to include youth who have previously received services within the program. Youth Advisory Council members represent and advocate for the perspectives of youth in the program and bring suggestions to the leadership regarding areas in need of improvement, new initiatives, and ideas for change. Further, Youth Advisory Councils value youth voice and create ways for youth to become full participants in all of the decision making processes within a program.

A Youth Advisory Council, based on the principles of youth-guided care, privileges the voices and perspectives of youth and provides them with legitimate decision making power.

“Programs should be interested in creating Youth Advisory Councils because these councils can help them to create policies and procedures that are youth-driven, which can ensure buy-in from youth.”

- Raquel Montes, Youth Advocate, Casa Pacific Centers for Children and Families

What Do Youth Advisory Councils Do?

Youth Advisory Councils....

- *Work on projects and initiatives of importance to youth in the context of the program.* Specific initiatives are developed by the youth, and the youth work collaboratively with their peers, staff, and leaders of the organization.
- *Provide a forum for youth to identify concerns and to make suggestions for change.* Youth work with leaders and stakeholders to develop strategies for improvement. Program leaders may bring questions to the Youth Advisory Council to solicit youth input regarding how the program can become more youth driven and responsive.

Leadership of a Youth Advisory Council

- *Peer Youth Advocates as Leaders.* Youth Advisory Councils are preferably guided by a *peer youth advocate*, who is a young adult with lived residential or community program experience. Through their presence, peer youth advocates can help the organization to establish credibility in terms of valuing youth voice. Peer youth advocates can provide youth with a sense of hope about pursuing a meaningful future.

Best Practice Tip: Hire a full time or part time peer youth advocate to lead the Youth Advisory Council.

- *Staff as Initial Leaders.* Programs that have not yet been able to hire peer youth advocates can initiate the Youth Advisory Council with the leadership of a staff member who has a strong rapport with youth in the program. Alternatively, programs can hire a youth who has since been discharged from the program to lead the Youth Advisory Council.
- *Program Leaders Have a Visible Role.* It is important for youth and staff to receive a clear message that all leaders throughout the organization stand behind and value the Youth Advisory Council. For example, the assigned executive leaders might attend the entire meeting or have a designated back-up staff member attend when they are unable to do so. In one program, the CEO attends either the entire meeting or the end of the meeting to more effectively implement suggestions and decisions made by the Youth Advisory Council.

Best Practice Tip: Program leadership must be passionate about youth-guided care and youth voice. Leaders should clearly communicate organizational changes toward youth-guided care to staff and stakeholders.

"I said [to staff], we're going in this direction, we'll keep you posted about what we're doing. Learn about youth-guided and family-driven care. If this isn't for you, you need to make a personal decision. If it's not for you, this isn't a place for you to work.... Programs should have a Youth Advisory Council because the whole treatment center is established for youth, and if the youth have no say, how can they get what they want from the treatment? If they don't have power, how do they receive the treatment they need....we can take care of some things while I'm sitting there (at the YAC meeting). Then it got to the point where I started inviting other department heads in. They talk a lot about maintenance issues, and I learned so much from them about what goes on around here. If there are maintenance issues, I invite the maintenance person...invite the person who is involved in the issue."

- David Cocoros, CEO, Youth Development Institute (YDI), Phoenix, Arizona

Evolving Toward a Youth-Run Council

The Early Stages

- As programs first initiate a Youth Advisory Council, adults can work with youth to develop a vision and purpose. At an early stage, adults may play a role in facilitating the meetings and projects.

"You can't expect perfection from the members. We're going to make mistakes, but it's about how we handle them."

- Youth Advisory Council Member, Youth Development Institute (YDI)
Residential Treatment Center, Phoenix, Arizona

Becoming Fully Youth Run

- A goal for a Youth Advisory Council is for it to become fully youth-run. In a youth-run Youth Advisory Council, youth oversee all aspects of the Council, facilitate the meetings, and drive the initiatives and projects. Youth assume full leadership of the Youth Advisory Council and its activities.
- Adult support continues to be important, even when a Youth Advisory Council is fully youth-run. Adult partners can support the Youth Advisory Council, but should avoid controlling and running the Council and its activities.
- While adult support is important, it may also be appropriate and useful for Youth Advisory Councils to have meetings without staff present. Youth Advisory Council members can take leadership and invite staff to pertinent meetings or hold additional meetings with leaders to discuss projects and initiatives.

Who are the Members of the Youth Advisory Council?

- *Number of Members.* Typically, there are 5-10 youth representatives on a Youth Advisory Council.
- *Open membership.* With an open format, all interested youth are invited and encouraged to attend.

Best Practice Tip: All youth should be eligible to participate in the Youth Advisory Council. Membership should not be based on levels or privileges.

- *Appointing or electing members.* Youth representatives, based on their interest in leadership, may be specifically invited to help plan the Youth Advisory Council. Potential youth members are interviewed by the current Youth Advisory Council and/or are elected by their peers. Membership should never be limited to youth on a certain level or with certain privileges. The Building Bridges Initiative discourages the use of level systems, as research suggests that such systems are ineffective, and do not support long-term positive success. Level systems are incompatible with trauma-informed and youth-guided care approaches.

Implementation of the Youth Advisory Council

Prior to the First Meeting: Prepare

Best Practice Tip: It is important to establish a budget for the Youth Advisory Council at an early stage.

- *Meet with Youth for Brainstorming Sessions.* To ensure that the Youth Advisory Council is youth-guided from the start, meet with youth to explain the idea, and to understand their vision for the Youth Advisory Council.
- *Start with the Building Bridges Tip Sheets.* Leaders from residential programs with current Youth Advisory Councils suggest studying the BBI Youth Tip Sheet, *Your Life, Your Future – Inside Info on Residential Programs from Youth Who Have Been There* and, the *Promoting Youth Engagement* documents prior to the meeting, to better understand youth involvement and youth-guided care. These can be found on the BBI website, www.BuildingBridges4Youth.org
- *Gaining Support.* Work closely with family members and staff at an early stage to share the vision.
- *Using Data to Develop the Vision.* Present data about program practices to the youth (e.g., use of restraint/seclusion; readmission information of youth to any out-of-home program after residential discharge; AWOLs; feedback on family and youth satisfaction surveys), including progress that has been made and areas that are still in need of improvement.
- *Developing a Plan.* Define tasks to accomplish and develop a plan. The plan should encompass both short-term goals with clear objectives and timeframes, and long-term goals and initiatives to pursue as the Youth Advisory Council gains momentum.

- *Carefully Select Which Staff Members to Involve.* Youth should be invited to provide input regarding which staff members will be asked to work with the Youth Advisory Council. Leaders should meet several times with chosen staff members to communicate a clear vision for the Youth Advisory Council and to brainstorm about implementing it. It is important to carefully choose which staff members will participate, and to allocate sufficient time for them to work on and prepare for the first and subsequent Youth Advisory Council meetings.

"Leaders need to buy into the process of making positive change to promote best practices related to permanency for youth. These leaders need to be committed to promoting the Youth Advisory Council and with their passion, the foundation will hold. Taking the time to build the foundation is time well spent. To keep the youth involved in this council, the leaders need to ensure that their voices are heard. The youth should see results related to their efforts. Without this council, the program would be limiting the ability to identify and make system improvements."

- Dorothy Tuttle, Senior Vice President of Programs, Easter Seals New Hampshire

- *Create an Agenda.* In consultation with program stakeholders, such as youth and staff, it is important to use this time to organize an agenda for the first meeting and to discuss how the meeting will be run, including who will facilitate and how ground rules will be established. After the first meeting, encourage youth and peer youth advocates to develop and set the agenda.

"I think it's important to allow youth to create their own agenda and topics. The youth are so much more engaged when the topic or task at hand has to do with an issue they are faced with at the moment."

- Raquel Montes, Youth Advocate, Casa Pacifica Centers for Children and Families

At the First Meeting

- *Planning the Basics:* A facilitator can lead the meeting and another individual should be appointed to take notes.
- *Develop a Fun and Positive Atmosphere.* Provide refreshments during the meeting and create a positive atmosphere. The meetings should provide youth with opportunities to get to know one another and to develop relationships.
- *Set the Stage for the Youth Advisory Council and its Purpose:* Time should be devoted to describing the purpose of the Youth Advisory Council, discussing the structure of the meetings, and developing goals.

- *Discuss Respect and Expectations.* Since the goal is for the Youth Advisory Council to become fully youth-run, it is important for the youth to develop their own goals and expectations.

Best Practice Tip: Decide on a regular meeting schedule for the Youth Advisory Council. Ideally, the Youth Advisory Council should meet on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

- *Maintaining an Atmosphere of Open Discussion.* Meetings should be flexible enough to allow for the discussion of specific issues that might arise.
- *Involve Youth in Setting the Framework for Meetings.* Involve youth in the process of developing a mission statement for the Youth Advisory Council, as well as criteria for how subsequent meetings will be run.
- *Celebrate!* Get youth excited about what they will be doing and motivated to participate. To do so, staff should make explicit that youth will have legitimate influence and power by participating on the Youth Advisory Council.

“Start small and show results....we had the youth talk about their experiences. If they were going to change anything, what would they change? What would they improve? It doesn’t happen overnight. It’s a culture change that takes time and constant feedback. Be patient.”

- Dorothy Tuttle, Senior Vice President of Programs, Easter Seals New Hampshire

Following up After the First Meeting

- *Recap and Updates.* Review what was accomplished at the last meeting and follow up with a progress report on any initiatives that are currently underway.

Best Practice Tip: Plan for changes in the membership of the Youth Advisory Council. Think about ways to sustain the Youth Advisory Council by looking for new members, particularly when you anticipate that current members will be discharged from the program.

- *Meet with Youth Advocates and Staff.* As a component of the follow up, conduct interim meetings with peer youth advocates.
- *Spread the Word.* Leaders should plan to regularly share changes and improvements made to the program based on Youth Advisory Council recommendations.

“Meet with the youth advocates to discuss the meeting and to prepare for the next one. This is a good time for brainstorming and reflection about how to improve the meetings.”

- Stephen Johnston, Director of Youth Development, Jewish Child Care Association

How to Sustain a Youth Advisory Council - Lessons Learned

- *Assign Tasks Between Meetings.* For instance, have youth read different Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) (www.buildingbridges4youth.org) or Youth M.O.V.E. (www.youthmovenational.org) documents on youth-guided care for discussion at the next meeting. These tasks keep a sense of momentum between the meetings.
- *Gain Support from Staff.* Invite staff to meetings to learn about BBI practices and about the Youth Advisory Council to understand the direction the program is taking toward a commitment to youth guided care.
- *Continued Support from the Leadership is Essential for Organizational Change.* The CEO should continue discussions of youth guided care and should strive to provide youth with decision making power. The CEO and other leaders should convey that the Youth Advisory Council is a priority, and should also work to ensure that the Youth Advisory Council’s initiatives and recommendations are taken seriously.
- *Inform and Involve Family Members and Guardians.* In addition to youth involvement, programs can strive to proactively work with family members (Find the companion BBI Family Advisory Council Tip Sheet on the BBI website: www.buildingbridges4youth.org)
- *Be patient.* Understand that the process of developing a strong Youth Advisory Council takes time and continued commitment.
- *Respect the Youth by Following Through.* Leaders should always follow up with the Youth Advisory Council members on the status of their requests and suggestions.

“If you can’t do what they suggest, still come back to them and come back with a compromise. It’s give and take.”

- David Cocoros, CEO, Youth Development Institute (YDI), Phoenix, Arizona

- *Youth-Run Councils are the Goal.* Encourage youth to take ownership of the Youth Advisory Council, with the goal of developing a fully youth-run Council. Adults should try to resist the urge to run or control the Youth Advisory Council.
- *Concrete Results are Important.* Consider working on a few projects at a time. It is helpful for youth to see concrete results to their energies on a regular basis.
- *Fostering Engagement.* To engage more youth in the work of the Youth Advisory Council, it is helpful to involve youth who have credibility with their peers.

“You have to seek out a really good, engaging young person. Young people will listen, but they will listen to their peers more than they listen to us. Peer relationships are the most important thing for a teenager. An involved youth can be very, very helpful. They can have conversations with other youth and the youth will become more trusting.”

– Stephen Johnston, Director of Youth Development, Jewish Child Care Association

Current Youth Advisory Councils: Examples of Early Achievements and More Advanced Initiatives

Early Achievements: Below are examples of early achievements of Youth Advisory Councils. Such achievements represent positive momentum, and exemplify goals that are appropriate for the first few months of the Youth Advisory Council.

- *Staff Dress Code Changes:* As the Youth Advisory Council was first developed, initial projects included changes to the staff dress code, based on youth feedback.
- *Phone Access:* The youth were interested in adding more phones to the premises, and worked to provide access to phones in order to be in closer communication with their families.
- *Making the Transition to Residential More Comfortable:* The Youth Advisory Council suggested simple changes, such as getting hygiene packets ready to distribute to youth as they first arrive at the program.
- *Planning Trips:* The Youth Advisory Council spent time planning outings and trips, and made suggestions regarding where they would like to go.

- *Decorating the Building and Rooms:* The Youth Advisory Council worked with the Family Advisory Council to decorate and to make the overall environment and specific rooms in the program more youth and family-friendly. It is a best practice for youth to spend time with their families in their homes and communities as much as possible (multiple times a week), but residential programs should also encourage frequent visits by family members to the program. Programs should be welcoming and warm for all family members, siblings included.
- *Family Involvement:* A Youth Advisory Council created a process where family members tour the facility and meet with staff prior to a youth entering the program. The youth also made a video called “A Day in the Life” to send to guardians, in the event that they could not be present for the intake procedure.

Advanced Initiatives: Below are examples of initiatives that Youth Advisory Councils should strive to achieve after the first few months. These more advanced initiatives are consistent with the principles of youth-guided care, and they represent steps toward a culture change within the organization.

- *Implementing the BBI Self-Assessment:* One Youth Advisory Council liked the BBI self-assessment tool and wanted the youth to complete it with a trusted staff member. They wanted to focus specifically on the treatment planning process, to ensure that youth have a voice. They developed a process for youth to complete the survey and to submit it confidentially.
- *Reevaluation of the grievance system:* The Youth Advisory Council redesigning the grievance forms and developing a process to ensure accountability by following up on the status of every grievance. To achieve this, the Youth Advisory Council now assists youth in filing and resolving grievances. To follow the status of grievances, a grievance coordinator was appointed. Peer to peer grievances are often handled by the Youth Advisory Council.

“We did a lot of stuff....interviewing staff, training them, and that was a big accomplishment. It helped the staff to understand us and to be more prepared. We also interviewed therapists. We did a lot on policies and grievance forms. Making sure the clientele can be heard quicker and faster.”

- Youth Advisory Council Member, Youth Development Institute (YDI)
Residential Treatment Center Phoenix, Arizona

- *Involving Youth in the Process of Hiring Staff:* The Youth Advisory Council interviews candidates for positions at the residential, including therapists and youth care workers. To assist youth in developing interviewing skills, staff educated them about legal and illegal questions and practiced developing spontaneous follow up questions during the interviews. Following the interviews, Youth Advisory Council members met with leaders at the residential to provide their feedback on the job candidates.
- *Changes to Staff Training:* Based on feedback from the Youth Advisory Council, staff training was transformed to become more focused and intense. Youth are now involved in the training program. The Youth Advisory Council members design scenarios for staff to respond to during the training, and then participate in a question and answer period afterward.

“We learned to listen to them. They are very on point with things. We’re not just soliciting input, we’re asking them to help us make changes in who we hire...what we need to do to make the program better....the panel discussion (with youth) was really meaningful because the kids talk about what it’s like to be here. They talk a lot about how people have left them....how they will act out to see if staff will abandon them, and they’re pretty open about that. They affirm that staff need to leave their problems at the door when they get to work and that they need to be whole heartedly invested in their jobs. It has a stronger impact when the youth say it to them.”

- David Cocoros, CEO, Youth Development Institute (YDI), Phoenix, Arizona

- *Youth Involvement in Evaluation of Staff:* The Youth Advisory Council developed a process for soliciting youth feedback on staff performance. They redesigned evaluation forms to make them youth-friendly, and these forms are compiled by supervisors, leading to a clear management change.
- *Protocol for Responding to Peer Conflicts:* The Youth Advisory Council expressed strong dislike for ‘behavior group’, which was the way that peer conflicts were being handled. As a result, the behavior group was abolished, and the youth developed a process for handling peer issues.
- *Redesigning Treatment Team Meetings:* The Youth Advisory Council provided feedback on how to change treatment team meetings to be more youth-friendly. They also provided feedback on how to ensure that youth have an opportunity to have a voice in planning their services.
- *Restraint and Seclusion:* The Youth Advisory Council is supporting the program to prevent and eliminate the use of restraint and seclusion.

- *Become a chapter of Youth M.O.V.E. National or develop a formal connection to a statewide youth advocate group:* Becoming an official chapter of a national and/or statewide youth-led organization will support youth in improving their advocacy and leadership skills and increasing their knowledge-base about issues that impact youth served in different systems. For more information visit, www.youthmovenational.org.

Contact Information for Leaders with Active Youth Advisory Councils

Raquel Montes
Senior Youth Advocate
Casa Pacifica Centers for Children and Families
(805) 445-7817
RMontes@casapacifica.org

Dorothy Tuttle
Senior Vice President of Programs
Easter Seals New Hampshire
(603) 475-2604
DTuttle@eastersealsnh.org

Stephen Johnston
Director of Youth Development
Jewish Child Care Association
(718) 742-8727
Johnstonst@jccany.org

David Cocoros
CEO
Youth Development Institute
(602) 256-5311
David.Cocoros@YDI.org