

WHAT EVERYONE OUGHT TO KNOW ABOUT

Starting a Child Sex Trafficking Youth Advisory Board

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Why a Youth Advisory Board?

Any organization that strives to serve and advocate for survivors of child sex trafficking should always provide a seat at the table for survivors, particularly youth survivors. Because of their age or assumed “lack of experience,” it is easy to dismiss the contributions of young people in developing policies and programs. This is particularly true for youth who have been framed as victims. However, the energy, insight, and innovation of youth make them valuable assets and contributors to any project, especially if it involves issues that directly affect them and their peers. *< Nothing about us without us!*

One way to incorporate youth voices is to start a Youth Advisory Board (YAB). A YAB provides youth and organizations with the chance to work with one another in a safe and structured manner. If done authentically and driven by a clear purpose, a YAB can not only benefit an organization’s goals but also offer youth opportunities to develop professional skill sets like networking and problem-solving. In addition, a YAB offers a more authentic and inclusive way to increase public awareness and community engagement.

Before starting a YAB, it is important to determine how you will compensate youth for their time and expertise. This includes determining the budget for how much and how long you can pay youth. If you do not have a budget to pay youth for their knowledge and skills, you should not start a YAB.

Here are some brief guidelines, tips, and questions to consider to help start and sustain a YAB for survivors of child sex trafficking.

Framework

The first step in developing and leading a Youth Advisory Board is creating a clear framework. Knowing the why and how of your YAB from the start is crucial to its success. If possible, include a young person who has survived sex trafficking when first establishing your board and conceptualizing your framework. Your planning process should include: determining the goal and purpose, engaging and enrolling board members, and building partnerships with youth-serving organizations.



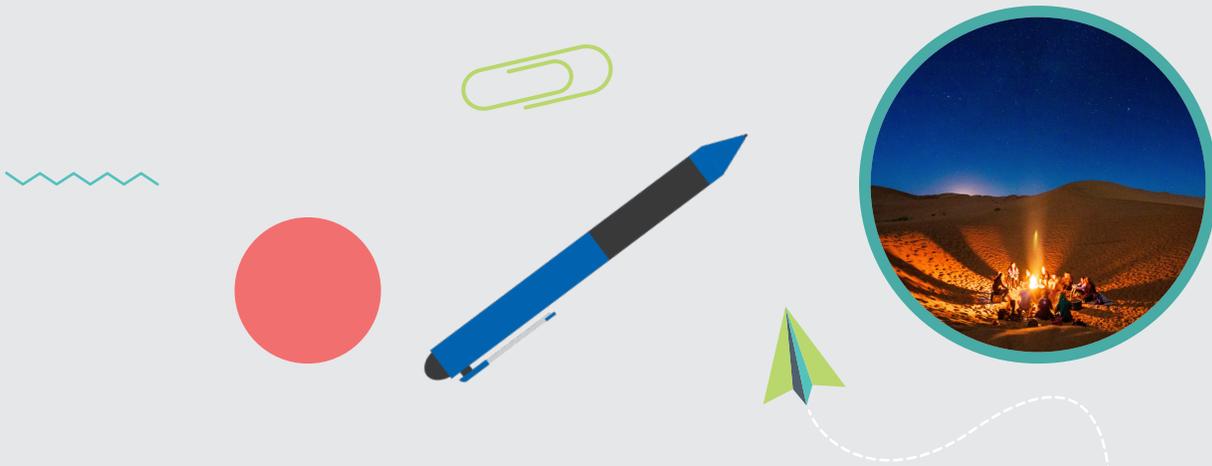
Determine the Purpose of the YAB

Knowing the scope and purpose of the board will help you determine how to connect with and train board members and will ensure that you are utilizing the YAB in a manner that positively impacts your project and the youth who serve on it. Take time to consider and develop agreed-upon language/processes for the following:

- Create a mission statement
- Identify the projects and goals the YAB will undertake
- Determine youth members' roles and responsibilities
 - *Will they be reviewing completed projects or helping in the creation process?*
- Clearly define why these objectives need the input of a YAB
- Determine a timeline for the YAB
 - *Is there a targeted endpoint of the YAB or will it serve as an ongoing resource for multiple projects?*
- Identify the need for confidentiality to protect youth
 - If you are conducting research or evaluations, submit your research plan to your Institutional Review Board
 - Develop confidentiality agreements for all individuals involved in the YAB or information shared by the YAB
 - Young people who are survivors of sex trafficking should have their information protected both from their abusers and from the legal system
 - Be clear with young people at every step about how, why, and when the knowledge they share will be used
 - If young people have active child welfare or juvenile justice cases create specific safeguards to ensure their information will remain confidential

Define the Target Population and Size of the YAB

Once you have a clear understanding of how young people's expertise will be utilized, you can start to identify who should be on your board. Treat the process of advertising roles on your YAB the same as you would if you were hiring for your organization. You must be clear about the skills, background, and expertise you are looking for before you start meeting youth.



Lived vs. Living Experience

Youth with lived experience are youth who have survived and exited sex trafficking. Youth with lived experience can provide insight based on their past experiences with systems. Youth with living experience are youth who may not yet have exited sex trafficking or are still involved with court systems in relationship to their trafficking. Young people who have living experience will have valuable insight into how your systems and services are functioning right now. However, before including young people who are currently involved in trafficking, you must also assess whether you have the capacity to guarantee the confidentiality of the young people and to provide therapeutic support. If you are unable to guarantee confidentiality you cannot have young people with living experience in a YAB. If you wish to include young people with living experience, you must thoroughly review how you will protect their safety. Having young people with lived and living experience in the same YAB could jeopardize the healing of young people who have exited trafficking or, in a worst-case scenario, youth who have not exited trafficking could be active participants in other board members re-entering the life. To minimize the potential for harmful impacts on youth with lived experience, youth with living experience should be in a separate group. Providing a space in the form of a YAB for young people who are in the process of exiting sex trafficking to take control of their own narrative may also be an important therapeutic step.

Identify the population of young people you are interested in including in your YAB by considering the following questions:

- Will you include young people with lived experience only, or also young people with living experience with child sex trafficking?
 - What additional experience should they have? For example, should they be involved in the child welfare system or the juvenile justice system? *< ensure a variety of perspectives are represented*
- What age ranges are appropriate for your project?
 - If you are working with youth who are minors you should consider the need to obtain the consent of a legal guardian
- What specific skills should they possess?
 - For example, what reading level is needed if they are reviewing written materials for professionals?
- Consider the size of the group needed to meet the goals of the project
- Consider separating groups by the gender they identify as
- Calculate how many young people you can afford to pay with the funding you have on hand within the project timeline. Never promise an incentive that you cannot meet when payday arrives.

It would feel uncomfortable to share some of these experiences with people of other genders even if they have been through similar experiences

Language For Engaging Youth

When working to enroll youth in your YAB, be intentional about the language you are using. Some words will have very different meanings and connotations for young people. In the professional world, the word “recruit” is commonly used to describe the process of identifying and hiring team members. However, this word has a very different meaning for young people who have been recruited into gang involvement or sex trafficking.

Engaging and Enrolling Youth

Identifying and connecting with youth is essential to the success of a YAB. Who and how you engage will determine the sustainability, participation, and ultimately the outcomes of your project. Your process for inviting youth involvement should be done broadly, actively, and on an ongoing basis. Utilize schools, local youth programs, and youth themselves to connect with youth. Young people are more motivated to participate if invited by a peer.

*Applications are a great way for youth to practice life skills.
Applications make the YAB feel more official*

- Create a simple application that includes a clear job description detailing participation requirements, responsibilities, and benefits
 - Utilize the criteria you determined in defining the target population
 - Allow youth multiple means to showcase strengths by offering multiple mediums within the application: digital, video/audio, and written
 - Be clear about the benefits of participation. Youth want to know what they will get in return for their involvement
- Utilize all marketing tactics: social media, flyers, word of mouth, and recommendations
 - Create materials that are vivid, informative of the intent and commitment, and provide links to additional information
 - Use youth-friendly language
 - Create a symbol that helps people recognize where to go and the purpose of the group
- Food is always an incentive < Snacks!
- If interest is low at the inception of the program, begin with an open meeting (with food or other incentives) to present the purpose of YAB and answer questions, then introduce the application process
- Search broadly and on an ongoing basis to include diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences

The symbol should represent freedom, have minimal words, and be bright

Pitch the Youth Advisory Board as a space where youth can have their voices heard. It is a safe space where they will have control and will not be alone. Follow through on that promise!

Partnerships

There are likely direct service providers who are already engaging with the young people who have survived sex trafficking within your community. These community-based organizations can serve many important roles as partners in maintaining the YAB.

- Identify the community partners you can collaborate with
 - Possibilities include schools, extracurricular programs, and college mentorship programs
- Confirm the roles that community partners have the capacity to provide, including, but not limited to the following:
 - Identifying Board Members
 - Do not ask them to do more work than necessary: provide a script and marketing materials
 - Maintain a contact list of potential future participants
 - Providing a safe neutral space to convene meetings
 - Be specific about meeting needs and schedules
 - Co-facilitation of meetings
 - Having a professional trained in working with survivors of child sex trafficking co-facilitate meetings can ensure that meetings remain places of healing and self-empowerment
 - Community outreach
- Allocate funds to reimburse community partners for their time, expertise, and space



Creating Engaging Meetings Through Structure and Facilitation

Once you have established your parameters and framework, it is crucial to spend as much time and effort on building the curriculum, the safety of the space, and youth confidence in the YAB. How you organize the structure, activities, and discussions of your meetings will determine the success and sustainability of your program. Respect the time and expertise of the youth you worked so hard to enroll in the YAB by offering them an authentic opportunity to share their insight and grow their skills. To do this well, you must consider how meetings will be structured, the staffing needs to maintain the YAB, the training needed by both youth and adult participants, and how youth can benefit from the YAB.

Structuring Meetings

In order for the YAB to maintain youth participation and be useful to both the organization and the youth, the meetings must be purposeful and engaging. Defining a clear structure and purpose for meetings is essential to the success of the YAB.

Ask youth how they want the meeting to be facilitated, how long they want meetings to last, where they want to meet, etc.

- Identify meeting frequency and length
 - Meeting times should be consistent and when youth are available
 - This may mean meeting after 5 pm or on weekends
 - Be aware of general outside scheduling conflicts and events: finals, graduation, spring or winter breaks, prom, etc.
 - Meetings should be consistent enough to ensure progress but not be burdensome
 - Plan the number of meetings according to the goals and timeline of the YAB
 - Be accommodating if special absences occur but stress expectations, especially if it affects compensation or leadership roles
- Identify an accessible, consistent location for youth to meet
 - Meetings should be hosted in a safe, neutral, and accessible space
 - The location should be accessible to those with disabilities
 - If the location is not in a place youth regularly meet already, ensure they have transportation options that are feasible in terms of cost and time commitment
 - Offer hybrid or virtual meeting opportunities

A consistent location and time make the space feel safer

Meeting DO NOTS

- Don't come in with a law enforcement officer
- Don't come in looking like a judge
- No school counselors
- Never hold meetings at the child protective services building or the court
- If this work is not a priority for you, don't come
- The professional team should not obviously be representing the state or government - dress normally!

- Develop clear agendas that are in pursuit of a goal or learning objective
 - o The meeting should regularly start with reviewing the ground rules, especially if there are new members or if members are not respecting the rules
 - o Purposeful does not always mean serious or reflective of the organization's end goal
 - Meetings can focus on team-building or activities youth have identified as needed for leadership growth
 - o To keep meetings engaging, offer multiple activities and transitions
 - Provide opportunities for youth to discuss, reflect, troubleshoot, or plan
 - Structured does not necessarily mean tedious. If meetings become too predictable or tedious, some youth will lose interest
 - o Meetings should be purposeful rather than just busy work
 - At the same time, incorporate some type of routine to set expectations and begin cultivating youth ownership
 - o Each meeting should include a summary of how previous meetings are informing real changes in your work

Professional Team Needs

YABs cannot operate in a vacuum – at least one team member from your organization is needed to coordinate meetings and communicate the YAB's feedback to the rest of the team and project partners. If additional team members are deemed necessary, outline their specific roles and duties in maintaining the board and supporting the youth. The team will need to build relationships and create a safe space where youth can feel empowered.

Don't be uptight. Take it seriously but don't make the space oppressive

- Select team members who have experience working with youth
- Determine how much time team members should dedicate to the maintenance of the YAB
- Identify how much you can invest in the YAB
- Ensure every team member interacting with the youth board has specific training on being a facilitator of youth leadership

Consistency! Team transitions are a normal part of business, however, for youth, they can be very disorienting and disrupt the relationships youth have built with team members. If there is going to be a change in the facilitator, coordinate a transition process where the former team member introduces the new team member. Having brand new people show up without an introduction will disrupt the feeling of safety and empowerment.

Training

For Youth

Youth may never have participated in meetings with adults prior to the YAB. Youth should be provided training not only on the purpose of the work but also on the past work that has led to the current needs. Youth should be encouraged to set group norms and ask questions as often as necessary, especially when using jargon or difficult-to-understand language.

- The initial meeting should focus on setting YAB norms and training youth on the goal and purpose of the YAB < Set the norms and expectations early and often
- Provide training for youth on assuming leadership roles in the YAB
- Create opportunities for youth to provide feedback on skills or topics they wish to learn
- Expose youth to other experts or leaders in the field
- Hold youth accountable to project goals and each other
 - Institute assessments, reviews, and debrief youth on their accomplishments
 - Facilitate peer discussions and reflections
- Provide ongoing expectation-setting and training on how the feedback from the YAB is being used, or will be used, and the process and timeline of how changes happen outside of the YAB

Youth want to actually have a say

For Adults

Often, adults sharing professional space with youth may not know how to create space for youth leadership. They may revert to a relationship of instructor and pupil rather than serving as a facilitator. Therefore it is important for adults to receive targeted training on how to facilitate youth-led work.

- Adult team members leading YABs should be provided specific training on how to cultivate youth leadership, share power with youth, and assess internal biases
- Adults should receive regular and continuous training on how to be trauma-responsive and centered on the ongoing healing of young people
- Adults should receive training on working with survivors of child sex trafficking
- Adults should be trained on confidentiality pertaining to minors
- Adults should be provided training on secondary trauma and connected to appropriate resources to ensure they are available to show up to meetings as their full selves
- Adults should be trained in de-escalation and conflict resolution
 - For example, Trust-Based Relational Intervention

It is super important that adults not match youth's energy when they are triggered or upset

Meet youth where they are. Don't expect youth to mirror adult formality. If youth were forced to behave like adults they wouldn't be able to share the honest truth.

Authenticity and Youth Benefits

The whole point of a YAB is to gain the insights and perspectives of youth to help develop and change policies and practices. Regardless of their age, they are expert consultants with lived experience and should be treated as such. In addition to establishing an authentic workspace, provide youth opportunities to participate in professional development and grow their skill sets. Offer multiple means of reimbursement to compensate youth for their time, efforts, and contributions.

- Cultivate youth ownership
 - Allow youth to troubleshoot and identify the next steps
 - Meet youth where they are
 - Foster connections between youth
 - Youth should be given opportunities to set the agenda and lead the conversation
- Youth should be paid the same as any other consultant or expert. This could include:
 - Hourly rates, daily stipends, and residual income for intellectual property
 - Reimbursement for travel costs or meals
 - Other compensation to reduce barriers such as parking, transportation, and/or childcare
- Youth's viewpoints should be validated and respected
 - YAB facilitators should not attempt to translate YAB members' feedback
 - Ensure youth understand that they can opt-out or say no
- Seek additional funding if necessary or limit the number of youth participants to ensure YAB members are compensated fairly
 - Develop part-time and full-time positions
- Ensure compensation does not create barriers by offering many options:
 - Housing stipends, cash, gift cards, CashApp or Venmo – ask youth for their preference
- Offer opportunities for professional development
 - Leadership roles within the YAB
 - Networking
 - Resume-building
 - Interviewing
 - Internships
 - Exposure to other people, cultures, places, and/or lifestyles
 - Continuing education opportunities
 - Finance and budgeting classes
- Educate youth on “reportable income” and how to report compensation to the IRS
 - Be cognizant of how stipends and compensation may negatively impact young people’s access to benefits
- The team should work to ensure that participation is understood and viewed favorably by parole officers and other court staff

Having food at the meeting is important but that is not compensation



Accountability and Evaluations

The organization should be accountable to the YAB for acting on the recommendations and feedback from members. Young people, particularly those who have been systematically failed by the system, might be distrustful that their opinions and viewpoints will be taken seriously by adults. You should be transparent about how exactly youth input will be used and create internal performance measures. Finally, youth should be given the opportunity to evaluate the performance of the YAB and offer insights on how to utilize the outcomes in their communities and address issues they are knowledgeable about.

- Explain the process through which youth feedback will be provided to the rest of the organization
 - Be clear in defining how long changes may take to implement
- At every meeting, report back to the youth on how their feedback was implemented, will be implemented, or will not be implemented and why
 - Youth may expect more immediate results and changes as a result of their feedback. Be prepared to provide detailed explanations of the future steps and timelines
- Design performance measures and an evaluation plan with YAB members
 - Conduct surveys and focus groups with the YAB

