

Topic Spotlight

Through the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP), communities around the country are creating Youth Action Boards (YABs) that bring youth voice to the forefront of their YHDP planning processes.

YAB members are youth who have experienced homelessness and housing instability while under the age of 25. While many communities have yet to create one, YABs can now be found throughout the country. But no matter where they are in the YAB process, most communities making a coordinated effort to end youth homelessness are seeking best practices for fully incorporating youth and young adult leadership.

To help meet this need, in the fall of 2019, we interviewed YABs from a range of communities about different aspects of their operations. From the results, we have created a collection of [Community Fact Sheets](#) and a series of Topic Spotlights that offer insights on key elements of YAB implementation.

Like any other board in a community, a YAB must find ways to recruit active members. YABs in particular need to understand what it will take to get the youth in their own community interested in being at the table. All the communities we surveyed said that word of mouth was one of the best strategies; however, in order to have youth who can start talking to their peers about the YAB, some successful recruitment must already have taken place! The next step is to implement strategies that keep youth engaged with the YAB. (A key component of both recruitment and retention is compensating YAB members for their time. Check out our [Compensation Spotlight](#) for more on this topic!)

This Topic Spotlight is part of a series compiled from the responses of seven community YABs surveyed by TAC with the help of consultant Lauren Leonardis: Those communities are Sacramento (CA), Columbus (OH), Boston (MA), Vermont Balance of State, King County (WA), Austin (TX), and Anchorage (AK). Thank you to each of these communities who so generously gave their time to this survey for the benefit of YABs across the country.

Online, Offline – It's All Good

Recruitment strategies can take many forms across a range of difficulty levels. Each community's approach will depend on its specific needs and resources. A good recruitment message will cover what the YAB is, why it's important, and how youth can get involved — in a brief yet attention-grabbing way. After word of mouth, online recruitment was one of the most effective tools used by the communities that we surveyed. Facebook Pages (including Groups and Events), Twitter, Instagram, blogs, and other such platforms are great starting places for your efforts.

The Gab on YABs

RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

A YAB meeting is most successful when things can be created, bodies can move from their seats, and the topic is one that brings out YAB members' expertise and passion.

Old-school, non-web methods are important, too! Many YABs have reached out to local youth-serving providers to set up a referral partnership; these organizations can often share a flyer as well. One recruitment strategy that may take more effort, but that was also frequently highlighted, is to host events or parties that attract the attention of youth in the community. Hosting events has the added benefit that the planning process works well as a retention strategy for current YAB members: those who hold key decision-making power are likely to commit to creating art, messaging, and themes. When planning events, involving the existing membership is indispensable — youth know best how to call in more youth and young adults in their community.

Build In Diversity From the Beginning

Diversity in recruitment is a key component of successful YABs. The YABs we surveyed employed a variety of methods to ensure diverse membership, including:

- Holding LGBTQ-specific events
- Defining diversity in the YAB by-laws
- Hiring diverse facilitators who reflect the population of local youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

Make the effort to create a welcoming, safe, and equitable space for all, especially those who may be in the minority.

If a YAB is not diverse in its representation, ask YAB members what can be done to make it more welcoming. This is a better approach than the tokenizing solution of inviting specific people just because of their identity.

What Keeps Youth Coming Back?

Youth and young adults experiencing homelessness often lack the stability to attend meetings regularly, so the ebb and flow of numbers in membership is normal. At the time when they answered the survey, YABs had as few as three members or as many as thirty-five.

Communities that have succeeded in retaining YAB members over a longer period report that in many instances, a core group emerges who can take on leadership roles within the YAB. Several respondents emphasized that youth will consistently prioritize attending YAB meetings only if they are seen, heard, and valued.

Here are some strategies that communities told us they had used successfully to strengthen and maintain YAB participation:

1 Empowerment & Ownership

Older adults can show respect for YAB members' expertise by handing the power to them, the people this work is about. The projects and tasks the YAB takes on should be agreed upon by the youth involved.

2 Consistency

Maintain a consistent, predictable meeting schedule that takes into consideration the school and work schedules of the youth involved, so that members know where and when they can find a YAB meeting that doesn't conflict with other important obligations. Current YAB members should have a voice in determining the meeting schedule.

3 Communication

To stay in contact with youth, try breaking away from standard "professional" modes of communication like phone and email. Most communities surveyed had the most success in contacting YAB members through Facebook Messenger.

4 Hands, Head, Heart

Hold YAB members' interest by structuring meetings around what youth want and how they learn. A YAB meeting is most successful when things can be created, bodies can move from their seats, and the topic is one that brings out YAB members' expertise and passion.

5 Reasonable Compensation

Payment is one of the most important ways to retain involvement and express to YAB members that their commitment to this work is valued. (See [The Gab on YABs: Spotlight on Compensation.](#))



Stay in Touch

Recruiting and retaining members is an ongoing process, not a task that is completed just once. As the demographics of youth experiencing homelessness in the community change, your recruitment and retention techniques may also need to evolve. Always seek out guidance from current YAB members to refine the process. ■