

A Guide to Partnering With Young Leaders to End Youth Homelessness

Training Tool 7: Inviting Youth Partners to Speaking Events

Inviting youth partners to speak at events is a common way for youth-serving organizations to highlight the importance of addressing youth homelessness. Events are also a great platform for youth partners to share their expertise. This tool showcases good practice for inviting young people with lived experience to speak at events.

Following the tips in this tool will guide your organization to involving young people in ways that promote meaningful interactions, support positive youth development, and steer clear of tokenism. Tokenism is a form of participation where young people engage in marginal roles defined by adults.¹ Tokenistic approaches are rarely intentional and organizations are typically not aware when their policies or practices tokenize young people; however, it has profound effects on young people's perceptions of themselves, their competencies and self-determination. This tool will help your organization ask honest questions about the process for inviting youth partners to speaking events.

This tool describes how to put into practice the Eighth Commandment of Youth Partnership: *Practice Positive Youth Development.*

Reflection Activity

Ask the following three questions:

1. **Were invitations sent to youth partners ahead of time so they could make time for the event and prepare a speech or presentation?**

Everyone needs time to coordinate with their jobs and families to make sure that they can attend events. Young people are no different. They should know about the event schedule as much in advance as possible.

2. **Was the youth partner given proper context on the event? (Date, time, location, purpose of the event, reason that they are attending)**

Background information for the event needs to be sent out to youth partners as far in advance as possible. There also needs to be a clear plan on how and when to get there and what will be expected of youth partners at the event.

3. Is the youth partner’s speaking topic focused around their experience or their expertise?

Instead of asking youth partners to tell their personal stories (which can be retraumatizing), allow them to talk about what they deem important in the context of the event. If invited and informed properly ahead of the event, they will have plenty of time to find a way to present their message in a way that feels comfortable and meaningful to them.

Youth Partners Speaking at Events

When inviting youth partners to speak at an event, it is courteous to invite them *at least one* week in advance, although more time would be appreciated, particularly if it is a larger event that needs more preparation. It is not appropriate to ask youth partners the week of an event to speak. Youth partners should be given the same amount of time to prepare as other partners.

If a youth partner is chosen to be part of a panel or to give a presentation, it is important to provide them with additional context about the event, the audiences that will be attending, the array of topics that will be discussed at the event, and your organization’s expectations of their presentation. Being explicit about your organization’s expectations is important because this is the only way to get a sense of the topics that youth partners will feel comfortable speaking about. Sometimes, even if expectations are explicit, youth partners may still feel uncomfortable questioning or challenging them. Therefore, this tool shares some guidance on the kinds of expectations of youth partners that should be challenged and avoided.



A fairly common expectation of a youth partner is that their primary role is to tell their personal story or to thank funders or politicians. While this may seem like a reasonable request, it falls into a form of tokenism that we call “puppeteering.” Puppeteering means to give youth a platform to speak or express themselves only within the parameters of what older adult partners want them to say. When inviting a young leader to an event, this should be an opportunity for them to share what they believe is important to share. Providing them with a pre-written speech or outline, asking them to make their story less “abrasive” or asking them to highlight pieces of their past experiences is disrespectful to youth partners and also supports the notion of youth as objects. Youth partners’ experiences and life stories may be powerful, but it is inappropriate to highlight their stories or struggles as their major contributions to the work. They are experts because of the knowledge they gain from those experiences, and the unique perspectives that they have because of it. Sharing expertise is different than sharing personal stories. This is not to say that youth partners should be told *not* to share their stories – the main point is that youth partners’ expertise is more than their stories and that they, like other adult experts, should be provided with choice in what they would like to say at the event.

Reflection Activity

What is the difference between asking a young person to talk about their experience versus asking them to contribute their expertise?

Asking youth partners about their experiences focuses on personal trauma rather than on an analysis of what is happening in the system and recommendations for solutions. Youth partners can contribute expertise on many issues, including but not limited to, the accessibility of services, the effectiveness of housing programs and support services, and innovative ways to design new programs and policies.

The Press

Talking to the press can be challenging for anyone. The media has a tendency to misrepresent people's stories and to simplify and stereotype experiences. The Youth Action Hub has had both good and bad experiences with the press. An example of bad experiences involved being asked to say specific "sound bites," telling us to smile more while on camera, and using the more personal parts of the conversation that we had thought was "pre-interview" and off record. Based on our experiences, we have included some tips to help prepare youth partners for talking to the press.

Tips:

- Let youth partners know that it is completely their decision to talk to the press and that they do not have to answer questions that make them feel uncomfortable.
- Assist youth partners in preparing for the interview by asking them what they want to say. An important part of preparing for speaking to the press is to take time identifying the youth partner's main messages that they want to come across during the interview.
- Encourage youth partners to create a list of main points that they want to cover. This will help them be clear and avoid being misrepresented.
- Practice a mock interview with youth partners so that they can practice steering the conversation based on their own agendas.



Setting a Good Example

Let's step into the shoes of a youth partner for a moment. Imagine yourself in this scenario: Jasmine is a youth partner and she has been invited by Barbara, an older adult partner, to speak at a youth organization's annual celebration. Several weeks before the event, Barbara sends Jasmine details on the location, time, and purpose of the event. Barbara then meets with Jasmine to provide her with more context about the event, the purpose of the event, the audience that is expected to attend, and the topics that would be covered by other speakers. This is the first time Jasmine has been asked to speak at an event and so she asks Barbara for

guidance about what she should talk about. Barbara asks Jasmine about the kinds of things that she would want the audience to know about. Barbara listens while Jasmine thinks through what kinds of things she would like to speak about and why. Before ending the conversation, Barbara asks Jasmine if she would like a reminder a day before the event and a ride to the event. The day of the event, Barbara picks up Jasmine at her house early so that they arrive early to get accustomed to the venue. She asks Jasmine if she feels ready. Looking down at her note cards, Jasmine smiles and replies 'yes' very confidently. They sit together at the event, and Jasmine reviews her note cards, remembering the public speaking tips she had learned from a mentor. She's nervous, but feels as ready as she can be. The master of ceremonies introduces Jasmine and she takes the stage to the thunder of applause.

How would you feel in this scenario?

This is a good example of how to invite and support youth partners to speak at an event. Make sure that youth partners are appropriately prepped before the event and that they have the opportunity to ask questions. If the event format allows audiences to ask questions, youth partners should also be prepped for that. In addition, if the press will be present, remember to prepare them in case they are approached by the press. We recommend youth partners be accompanied by someone who can help with navigating the event, like Barbara. This is absolutely crucial for out-of-state events. Some youth partners may not be used to traveling or attending large events out-of-state. If there is someone there to guide them and answer questions, then youth partners will be able to feel more comfortable about participating in events and networking with new people.

References

¹ Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocent Research Centre. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf