

A Guide to Partnering With Young Leaders to End Youth Homelessness

Training Tool 3: Identifying a Good Mentor

Quality mentorship is critical to the success of a youth partnership. This training tool is designed to help professionals and organizations recruit a good mentor to support youth partners in their work. Identifying a mentor is the “Fifth Commandment” to supporting youth partnership. Mentors provide essential supports to young leaders as they work together with partners toward ending youth homelessness.

A mentor is a caring, consistent, and experienced person that provides a young leader with support, guidance, and assistance.¹ Research shows that quality mentoring affects young people in positive ways, leading to higher self-esteem, better relationships with adults and peers, a reduction in risk-taking behaviors, higher achievement in school, and a more optimistic outlook of the future.^{2,3} A kind and caring adult who provides guidance and support is incredibly impactful in a young person’s life. Mentors are a key resource for youth partners; they support youth partners in actualizing their goals by providing training, team facilitation, coaching and other supports. Mentors facilitate the development of a young leader’s competence, confidence, positive social connection, character, and caring,⁴ as well as contributions to their communities.⁵

This tool describes how to put into practice the Fifth Commandment of Youth Partnership: *Identifying a Mentor.*

Reflection Activity: *What Were You Like at 18 Years Old?*⁶

Read and reflect on the following questions:

- What was it like being 18 years old?
- Where did you live?
- What did you look like?
- What made you different?
- What was important to you --- what did you think about a lot?
- Did you participate actively in your community?
 - If yes, what did you do?
 - If no, what kept you from participating more actively in the community?
- What kinds of jobs had you worked at?
- Who were the older adults you knew who worked well with young people?
- What were their qualities or characteristics?
- What could older adults have done to help you participate more actively?

This activity should have helped you to recall yourself at the similar age of youth partners, set appropriate expectations of youth partners and understand the various supports and needs that youth partners may have when undertaking the work.

Qualities of a Good Mentor

This section provides a list of qualities that make a good mentor. This list is not exhaustive but highlights attributes that the Youth Action Hub consider important.

A good mentor must:

- 1) Be knowledgeable about the systems involved in youth homelessness. They will need to be able to answer questions that youth partners may have about the systems they are trying to change, and teach what they know, accepting the young leader's current level of knowledge and professional experience.
- 2) Be patient, kind, well-organized, and superbly empathetic. A good mentor is one that understands the struggles that youth partners with lived experience often face and will be patient and helpful to young people experiencing these issues. They will be able to help youth partners navigate problem areas in their life and assist them with accessing resources they may need.
- 3) Motivate youth partners by setting a good example. A good mentor exhibits enthusiasm about the work and demonstrates the personal attributes that are needed to be successful and productive. A good mentor is someone who is positive, smiling, and present in young people's lives when they need it.
- 4) Value ongoing learning and growth. A mentor should be someone that can help guide youth partners in a wide variety of situations from meetings and conferences to the pursuit of education and professional development, such as helping to create opportunities for youth partners to attend workshops and conferences.
- 5) Provide guidance and constructive feedback. A mentor must respect a youth partner's ability to choose their own path, and provide guidance when it is invited. Feedback must be constructive and conducive to a youth partner's growth and wellbeing. Understanding the weight of a perceived failure and helping to alleviate that is part of a mentor's duties.
- 6) Identify and reduce barriers for youth partners to stay consistently engaged in the work. Rather than punishing absenteeism, mentors should take the opportunity instead to have a "heart-to-heart" about possible problems in the youth partner's life in order to explore ways that the mentor can help them reach where they want to be.
- 7) Educate older adult partners on how to partner with young leaders. Working as a conduit, a mentor should understand and echo youth and young adults' concerns *and* praises to older adults who may not work as closely with them. Not only is it important to educate these parties, knowing that a mentor will stand up for your right to be heard, understood, and taken seriously goes a long way towards building the level of trust and enthusiasm needed in a cooperative setting such as the one a mentor is trying to build.

In general, a good mentor embodies the attributes of a great teacher, coach, guidance counselor, and manager. In order to best serve youth partners, their mentor must be able to connect with them and help them connect as a group while delivering necessary education and professional development opportunities. A good mentor takes a personal interest in the mentoring relationship. They feel invested in the success of their mentee.

The Role of a Mentor

Supporting Personal *and* Professional Growth

Mentors should foster personal and professional development in the young leaders they are supporting. Youth partners may have previously experienced or continue to be experiencing housing struggles. The opportunity to work in a compassionate and flexible environment can give youth partners a solid foundation on which to build. Mentors may teach career skills as well as some independent living skills. This helps to improve youth partners' quality of life, and demonstrates caring about youth partners as individuals, not just as colleagues or employees. To foster professional development, mentors should be prepared to offer opportunities for youth partners to gain skills in networking, presenting at conferences, speaking to policy-makers, writing legislative testimony, conducting research, or other professional activities.

Training

Mentoring is like a bridge. Information from adults can be filtered through mentors to explain to young people in a way they will understand, and information from those young people can be more easily brought to adults who may not have acclimated to having youth at the table. Providing youth with a way to indirectly access information and bounce ideas off someone helps them to establish the clarity and context necessary to be competent in technical language and knowledgeable about the policies and practice affecting youth homelessness.



Like any new employee, youth partners will need a baseline education about the state of the campaign overall, their role and the roles of partner organizations, as well as technical terms that are commonly used in our work, such as Coordinated Access Networks (CANs) and the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). Effective onboarding prepares new partners for success and enhances commitment, consistency, and retention among new partners. Onboarding is a process with the purpose of integrating a new youth partner physically, emotionally, and professionally into their new working environment. A mentor's role is to prepare a training curriculum and an onboarding process for new youth partners to develop the necessary skills, knowledge, and behaviors to meaningfully contribute to the campaign. The onboarding process should convey fundamental information about specific job requirements, the working environment, and the culture of collaboration within the campaign while orienting youth partners to the campaign's objectives and providing an overview of the training plan. Youth partners may not have had prior experience working in an office environment or with other professionals and may need training on writing professional emails, dressing professionally, showing up on time, etc. Offering guidance in a non-judgmental way can go a long way toward helping a youth partner flourish.

Supervising

Depending on the employment arrangement, mentors may supervise youth partners' work; however, this work should be steered by youth partners. A mentor's role is to provide support and guidance when needed, and to ensure that youth partners have the resources needed to achieve their goals. When youth partners are working in a team, an additional role for mentors is to provide feedback on the group's performance and assist the group in holding itself accountable to its goals and expectations. If appropriate, this may entail helping to create processes for evaluating individuals' and the group's performance as well as governance policies that explicitly describe what happens if an individual does not meet expectations.

Facilitating

Facilitation is key to building an effective and long-standing group of youth partners. A mentor must feel comfortable helping discussion along without influencing it directly, and allow time and space for everyone to participate in the discussion. The team of youth partners must decide on their ground rules and group expectations, and the penalties for breaking them. These can be redefined as time goes on. Group expectations must be unanimously agreed upon. The role of a mentor is to encourage youth partners to identify and consider all the options within their collective beliefs without suggesting a course of action.

Group Building

Group building is very important, but often put on the back burner. Positive and trusting relationships among team members along with creating a fun and motivating work environment are fundamental to retaining consistent youth partners. Youth partners will be working closely together for a long period and they cannot be productive without building a positive working relationship right from the start. With a diverse team of youth partners, it is imperative that misconceptions and stereotypes be addressed promptly. Mentors should have a curriculum of activities and group discussions that will allow people to get to know each other in a fun and friendly environment. Serious, in-depth group discussions should not take place until the group has become comfortable with each other. Some activities designed for diverse groups may push their limits, but this is an important step and the group will ultimately function improperly if these topics are not dealt with swiftly. Once the group is feeling comfortable, it is important to also act as mediator in the event there are disputes to settle.

Inspiring Ownership and Leadership

Instilling a sense of ownership is key to ensuring the efficacy of a group over a long period of time. Helping youth partners to see the bigger picture and how much they really can accomplish goes a long way. Offering opportunities for youth partners to advance in the organization or work builds ownership of their projects. Mentors should be preparing youth partners to take over many of the mentor's responsibilities when they are ready. This is an important goal of youth leadership; a mentor must prepare their mentees to fly on their own.

Bridging Communication

Another important role of a mentor is to educate and socialize the host organization and external partners to cultivate an environment that welcomes and appreciates young leaders as permanent, fully realized partners. It may be difficult for other professionals to hear that they have made a faux pas, but it is even harder for young leaders to grin and bear it. Similarly, older adult partners may feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the way young leaders communicate and interact with the world around them. Bridging the gap between worlds helps to keep both

parties informed in a way that is comfortable and understandable to them - but also does not let anything slide.

References

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