

ADVICE TO YOUNG ADULTS

FROM YOUNG ADULTS



Helpful Hints for Policy Change
in the Mental Health System

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Introduction

This tip sheet is designed for use by youth and young adult led organizations that include young people with lived experience in the mental health system in their membership. Organizations that have a history of working together collectively, have clear leadership roles and are ready to move into policy change are most likely to find these tips useful. The recommendations and the quotes contained in this tip sheet came from a series of interviews with young adult leaders from advocacy groups that focus on mental health challenges or living in foster care. Each organization was selected because of its work to change a policy that was important to its membership.



1. Develop a clear focus

Start with a policy issue that is important to young adults in the organization. The group may not want to take on the whole issue, but rather select a piece where they are likely to have impact. Seek out a list of current legislative bills relevant to your general topic. Youth and young adults in the organization may discover legislation that they want to support or challenge based on what they know from lived experience.

"If you don't know what you want to accomplish, then how are you going to get support around it, and have other people vote to support it, if you don't know what you are doing."

"We polled our members, youth throughout the state and asked what do you want to see changed, what do you want to see improved about the system. We came up with a policy agenda that outlined a number of things for older youth transitioning to adulthood."

"... every year... at one of our quarterly meetings... we come up with a legislative agenda. This is where two representatives from each chapter... they throw out all the issues that have impacted their local chapters. ... When we come up with that legislative agenda, we vote on it."

2. Seek Information

Those involved in policy change need information in the following areas:

a) How policy or system change happens. This may include information about how the legislative process works as well as informal pathways that may be unique to your state or community.

“Even in our local chapters and our state-wide quarterly meetings, we teach the legislative process. We teach on how to advocate or how to be a better advocate... Sometimes at our quarterly meetings... we have legislators come and talk to us about what it takes to get a bill passed. We have people in the media who talk to us about how to... talk to the media.”

“Each week we focus on various systems and practices that go on within those systems. We could focus on the juvenile justice system for weeks on end, months on end. One discussion topic may be how law guardians interact with young people, and the fact that they only see them before their court proceeding and there is not a genuine relationship there. Then the young person can't trust them, but yet they are speaking for them when it comes to their life. We discuss all systems and we discuss the practices that go on within them.”

b) The context of the issue. This might include background about the original intent of a policy you want to change, data about how many people are affected, research about the impact of the problem etc. You may also want to know about previous attempts to change the policy.

“The study was introduced to us by Open Society Institute. From the study, the three organizations that we work with decided that this was something harmful for children... Once we figured out all the statistics, we decided to create our own campaign around the issue. We were seeing that the systems created in [this state] having children housed as adults, just wasn't working. It was a money loss for the state.”

“... we always, always, always prep them before meetings. So we will have a pre-meeting to a subcommittee workgroup. Sometimes that will look like us gathering a group of them... and talking about what they can expect and maybe making talking points of what things they think need to be changed... going over the agenda.”

c) Who will support or oppose your solution. This may include information about what advocacy groups have tried to address this issue, who might serve as a champion, and what some of the of the challenges or difficult questions might be.

“We didn't realize that there would be a counter-message that we needed to fight, so our communications didn't have it. We just assumed that everyone understood that foster youth need financial support. So early on we didn't have [a response] so that spread quite a bit before we were able to come back and counter it.”

“There was one... lawmaker... and he was the chair of the House Health and Social Services Committee. He wouldn't let the bill out of committee. He wouldn't give it a hear...and we couldn't figure out why. ... I went to his office and it was just me and him. He told me basically that he thought it was up to God to make these kind of decisions and to save the children.”

3. Establish partnerships

Develop partnerships with groups that share the interest and goals of your organization. This will extend your group's reach and give it more influence. Some places to look for partnerships are other advocacy organizations such as groups of youth and young adults interested in changing policy regarding foster care. Partners may also be found in statewide family advocacy groups or adult mental health consumer organizations. You might also talk with the local Mental Health America (MHA) chapter, NAMI chapter or advocacy groups for physical disabilities. Cross-system partnerships might also develop around the topic of the policy you want to change as seen in the first quote.

"We were huge partners with a community college. Their staff had experience with foster care and they had just been working with a Commissioner around housing for youth. ... So they were coming down and testifying in support of the bill and sharing their experience."

"We were just lucky enough to have really strong relationships with folks in the state that we felt comfortable enough to [say], "Can you stop, I don't understand what that means."

"But youth-adult partnerships, that is what made us a success. ... The adults really... understand [our] actual lived experience and how that can help create better services and better quality programs."



"Youth-adult partnerships, that is what made us a success."

4. Find champions

Champions are people who have a strong interest in your issue, and are willing to help you pursue needed policy changes. Sometimes they have a personal interest in the policy your organization wants to change, for example, they might have a relative with a mental health condition, or might have been in the mental health or foster care system themselves.

Individuals who believe in your organization and your cause can provide you with information, answer your questions and introduce you to influential individuals or groups. Many of these champions can be found in the leadership of the state mental health, child welfare or juvenile justice divisions, and sometimes in the legislature. Champions can also be family members, neighbors or your own service providers.

"We have friends in the legislature, or champions we call them. They are passionate about child welfare issues and children's issues. So we know who to go to. Those that maybe have sponsored a bill... or those who have expressed interest, or... have welcomed us into their office, or whatever the case may be."

"I said, 'Hey, I think you should read over this, look at it and tell me what you think.' So he did, and he called and said, I think we should sponsor a bill... so he sponsored a foster care bill."

"So the connection with the secretary of DCF – it has been a tradition. We have breakfast and dinner or lunch with the secretary. Some of us have his personal number and are friends on Facebook."

"We have friends in the legislature, or champions we call them."



5. Emphasize lived experience

The stories that youth and young adults share about their experience in the mental health system are critical to your organization's ability to make policy change. A story about a difficult experience, followed by a statement of how the policy change will help, delivers a powerful message. Most of the people in charge of changing policy have no "lived experience" in any of the systems that effect young adults. The experiences of the youth and young adults in your organization can help them understand this.

"That is what the stories were useful for. Trust (that) stories are really crucial to any piece of legislation that you are passing, whether it is higher education, health education, financial literacy – the stories and the hardships and adversities of the youth. Even the [stories] of foster parents and the professionals, based on their daily struggles."

"Representative X spoke to us... and he said, you guys have to come talk to us because we have no idea what you have been through. ... You have to talk to legislators so we actually know what is going on. All we see is numbers on paper."

"We had officials come in from state child welfare, and we had youth testify. That is when I think we started to see the change, where people saw the impact of youth coming in..."

"The truth is the truth, especially with young people. You can't tell them that their story doesn't matter and that their truth is not their truth. I think a lot of people belittle... their experiences or [say], 'Oh, it is normal adolescence. Teens are depressed all the time'. I've learned through all the youth that I have met that there is a lot more to their stories."

6. Never give up

Changing a policy related to mental health or other services may take several years. It is important to anticipate the timing of legislative process in your state and plan ahead about when to raise your concerns again. Rethink collaborations and strategies, review and modify the proposed policy change. Learn from your success and failures and develop strategies to address counter arguments that may have been used against your ideas.

"I think that the process lasted at least a month, probably 3 months total of just going to the capital, meeting with people, and then eventually scheduling the interviews, and then getting the dates for the hearings, and going to some hearings and actually testifying at one of them."

"I think definitely not giving up, especially if it is important to you. Like I said, they were a little resistant at first, but our voices do matter, so it is not giving up. Do your research so you know what you are talking about kind of thing. Prepare your youth beforehand."

"Sometimes you have to slow down the process a little. Sometimes the community's timeline doesn't match up with the fiscal year. You have to continue to do everything you can to get things done, but there is forgiveness because the system is asking for change. So it can't happen within the timelines that the old system was used to."

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especially with young
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Youth 'N Action Washington

Just Kids Maryland

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Quality Improvement Council

IPOD/Lummi Nation

Bravehearts M.O.V.E. New York

For More Information

The information from the study and the quotes from participants are meant to be used by youth and young adult advocacy organizations as they work to make policy change. Below are links to resources for more information:



Research and Training
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Youth M.O.V.E.
National

www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu

www.youthmovenational.org