

Elevating Youth Leadership in Texas

After the fourth iteration of the Young Hearts Matter Leadership Board (YHMLB) and after feedback from YHMLB alumni, the Prevention Team at the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) is taking an opportunity to transform our youth engagement. Three challenges have persisted in our youth engagement efforts: 1) organizing a youth board with diverse young folks from across such a large geographic area while trying to maintain high levels of engagement, 2) encouraging youth leadership from afar, and 3) empowering young people to plan and implement activities both locally and statewide. While some youth expressed deep appreciation and impact, others were increasingly disengaged throughout the service year. Additionally, TCFV's youth-focused work was entirely held under the banner "Young Hearts Matter." While this moniker was developed many years ago, with the current prominence of other social movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Team decided it was socially responsible to rebrand to center the global racial equity movement.

With the motivation to meaningfully engage young people through restructuring and rebranding, the Prevention Team decided to suspend the YHMLB for a year and embark on some discussions with youth to determine the best courses of action. The Team set the intention of engaging YHMLB alumni and former youth interns in the initial process for reflection and idea generation. To decrease bias, the Team decided that bringing in outside facilitators would be best. We wanted folks who the YHMLB alumni and former interns would feel comfortable providing honest critiques without feeling like they were disappointing or upsetting TCFV staff. TCFV compensated youth participants for their time and their work by providing individual stipends for participation. The workshops were conducted virtually, in part due to the ongoing pandemic and to engage young people from different regions of Texas.

TCFV staff chose to engage a consultant firm which has facilitated many trainings and provided thought leadership to TCFV membership organizations in the past. Backloop Consulting utilizes Liberating Structures and other strategies to promote conversation

and innovative thinking. After a couple of planning meetings and soliciting some feedback from two YHMLB alumnae, the consultants facilitated three learning/listening workshops with other YHMLB alumni and former interns to determine how TCFV can improve our engagements with youth throughout Texas while ensuring a meaningful experience for participants, their communities, and TCFV. The first two sessions were focused on principles and values; the third session was focused on structure. TCFV helped recruit the participants and served in a coordinating capacity. As of the end of September 2021, all content sessions have been conducted and we are awaiting a formal debrief meeting.

Some initial lessons learned:

1. The experiences we had created with the youth board and internships were more deeply impactful for young people than we had realized.
2. Young people deeply appreciated empowerment-based leadership opportunities that stand out from other experiences where they are not given trust, autonomy, or real responsibility.
3. Youth are looking to make noticeable impacts on their peers and communities.
4. Embracing young people's opinions and values will be key to continued success.
5. Being able to accommodate multiple levels of engagement while maintaining a steady structure/schedule will allow for more youth to be involved as their schedules allow.
6. Young people really appreciate engaging in aspects of systems they are not normally invited to participate in, such as policy/legislative forums and professional conferences.

Some notable limitations:

1. We only had seven participants.
2. Our participants were all highly involved during their tenure as interns or leadership board members. Youth who disengaged from the programming are not represented in the feedback and ideation.
3. With such a small group, all identities were not fully represented.

Some suggestions/need-to-knows:

1. Compensate youth for their time, emotional labor, and contributions.
 2. Put your own (and your agency's/program's) pride aside. To reduce defensiveness and adultism, create space for true reflection and honest critique.
 3. Include young people in all stages of planning, implementation, and debriefing.
 4. Even with small groups, strive for diversity, equity, and inclusion across multiple metrics.
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2022 Update

We decided to slightly restructure our youth leadership engagement. In doing so, we created a general youth membership category for our coalition, where young people will be able to access our trainings and add their collective voices to our advocacy like other coalition members in other categories. We are maintaining a youth leadership advisory board that will serve to engage the general youth membership as well as lead planning for broader youth activism and advocacy activities related to intimate partner and gender-based violence prevention in Texas. This revamped advisory board began recruiting at our 2022 Youth Summit and officially convened in June 2022. Recruitment was wide-ranging to uphold the diversity of the group across a number of metrics, including reaching youth who are not currently engaged with domestic violence programs throughout the state. The new board will have more formally defined positions including co-chairs and leads for various projects and aspects of the board's tasks. The tasks for the newly convened board will be to continue our rebranding process, regularly communicate with and engage the general youth membership, plan and execute Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month activities, and to help TCFV engage youth advisory councils at local family violence programs.



Promising Futures



Promising Futures is a project of Futures Without Violence. For more information on how to transform your program to effectively meet the needs of parent and child survivors of domestic violence, visit www.promising.futureswithoutviolence.org or email childrensteam@futureswithoutviolence.org.



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