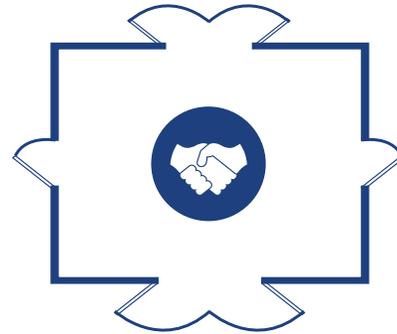# Youth Engagement Blueprint Series: Having the Right People

What is Youth Engagement?

Youth engagement is the intentional, authentic, and sustained involvement of young people in a decision-making activity (Gaughen et al., 2009). "Using Science and Technology Effectively" is the third in a series of four factsheets that will provide practical advice for increasing capacity for youth engagement at the organizational level.

Who Are the "Right People" for Youth Engagement?

To engage youth effectively, organizations need to hire and retain the "right people" for the job at all levels of an organization. The right people to work with youth in foster care tend to see themselves as "mentors" rather than "caseworkers." They also often share many of the following characteristics (www.youth.gov):

- Lived experience in or with the child welfare system, or prior experience in helping roles or occupations (DuBois, et al., 2002).
- Proficiency in trauma-informed and trauma-responsive care, particularly focusing on adolescent development.
- Respect for youth and their specific cultural backgrounds.
- Ability to see young people as partners and resources rather than "objects" or "recipients" of adult care.
- Empathy and authenticity (Spencer, 2006).
- Personalities, interests, and expectations compatible with those of young people (Madia & Lutz, 2004).
- Ability to engage in open and honest communication with young people and others. The right people for youth

"Promoting and embracing youth engagement in an organization is more than an activity, it has to be a part of the agency's DNA. To truly achieve authentic youth engagement, you need staff who embrace that cultural value and have the appropriate approach and skill set to develop relationships and engage with young people. It is more than just about who you hire, it's about how you harness the value of individuals with lived experience at all levels, as board members, as staff, consultants, and volunteers."

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engagement will speak with young people in a way that encourages them to be open about their opinions and the changes they would like to see.

- Flexibility and openness. The right people understand that adolescence is a time for practice and skill development. They will encourage young people to take calculated risks and treat any mistakes that sometimes result as part of a developmentally appropriate learning process.
- Ability to see solutions and opportunities, and help youth to see them as well (Mentor, n.d.).

Importantly, the right people have a genuine desire to be involved with and help youth, and have the ability to listen and offer friendship, guidance, and encouragement to a young person (Mentor, n.d.). Child welfare organizations should make an effort to seek staff with some of these qualities—such as proficiency with trauma-informed care, flexibility and openness, and ability to see young people as partners and resources—even if they do not work with young people directly. Child welfare staff can draw on their understanding of young people to support the policies, procedures, and programs necessary for effective youth engagement. The qualities listed above and other youth-friendly qualities can be evaluated using assessment tools, such as "The Spectrum of Adult Attitudes Toward Young People Questionnaire" (described below).

How Will the Right People Engage with Youth?

Because they have the skills and desire to work with young people, the right people will strive to en-gage in authentic relationships (Norman, 2001). Authenticity in youth engagement has many aspects. For example, adults must be able to hold positive attitudes about young people and respect youth culture. Conversely, "engagement loses authenticity when adults are conflicted about questions of power and control" (Casey, 2012). The right people are willing to put in the time and effort to engage with young people as equals, and to make sure their perspectives are front and center in any decisions that concern their lives.

The right people for youth engagement are aware that effective youth–adult relationships provide equal opportunities for both adults and young people to make decisions and learn from each other. They also work to build mutuality in the youth–adult relationship, in which both sides have equal input and can build on each other's strengths. When neither side dominates the other, adults and young people can work together toward common, mutually agreed upon goals (Casey, 2012). The right people for youth engagement will make sure that the young people with whom they work:

- Feel respected, valued, and trusted
- Have access to an environment that facilitates their engagement
- Feel their voices are being heard
- Are given the opportunity to make decisions and lead
- See change and progress happening as a result of their involvement or see their ideas being implemented, which may include access to new ways to participate in leadership and decision-making, the inclusion of young people in curriculum development and training activities related to youth programming, requests for young peoples' feedback, and other activities that consistently engage young people in their own care

The relationships that result should "emphasize mutuality and respect among youth and adults, with a goal-oriented focus on sharing and learning" (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013).

Building Organizational Capacity for Finding and Retaining the Right People

Capacity describes the potential of a child welfare system to be productive and effective by applying its human and organizational assets to identify and achieve its current goals. Building organizational capacity for having the right people encompasses all five dimensions of capacity building: resources; infrastructure; knowledge and skills; culture and climate; and engagement and partnership (The Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative, Brief #1: Child Welfare Organizational Capacities, 2016).

Building Resources for Finding and Retaining the Right People

This includes concrete materials and assets, such as staff, funding, facilities, equipment, data collection tools and systems, informational and program materials, curriculum, and technology.

- Target recruitment efforts at young adults formerly in foster care and others with similar life experiences, since these groups likely will be able to relate to young people in foster care and may serve as effective mentors and role models. Organizations can then involve foster care alumni and youth leaders to help recruit the right people for youth engagement.

- Provide training and supervisory support for workers to work together with young people to effectively implement youth engagement programming. This may include training in techniques such as motivational interviewing (Miller & Rose, 2009) and the practices of trauma-informed and trauma-responsive care, among others (LaLiberte & Crudo, 2013).

- Identify "organizational champions" to assist those working with young people to get the resources they need to do so effectively. This may include locating available funding for youth development, finding comfortable spaces for young people and adults to work together, and helping to develop the informational and program materials necessary to educate staff at all levels of the organization about youth development and engagement.

Strategies for youth engagement-friendly recruiting and hiring practices may include:

- Altering interview questions to assess whether a person possesses the necessary qualities for working with young people.

- Being intentional about targeting job announcements to adults formerly in foster care, and placing the announcements where they are most likely to be seen by foster care alums.

- Asking young people currently in foster care to be part of the search and interview process.

- Administering personality tests prior to hire (if allowed by the laws of the State or jurisdiction).

Building Infrastructure for Finding and Retaining the Right People

This includes organizational structures and processes, such as policies, procedures, governance structures, service array, decision-making processes, practice protocols, training, HR systems, and quality improvement systems.

- Seek input from young people in foster care regarding who they think the right people are and the best way to recruit and retain them. For example, many States and jurisdictions

have created Youth Advisory Boards (YABs) to promote youth leadership and engagement in the child welfare system.

- Consider inviting YAB members to participate in the hiring process for foster care workers who will work with youth. Organizers should also attempt to reach out to youth who are not formally involved in leadership organizations, particularly youth considered to be at risk, to attempt to engage them in decision-making and to include their voices.

- Get buy-in from organizational leaders for hiring the right people—those who have the qualities described above—for youth engagement positions. In addition, ensure that staff at all levels of the organization have some of the necessary qualities for working with young people, since it will help them craft youth-friendly policies and programs.

- Create an organization mission statement that prioritizes youth engagement, promotes the involvement of youth at all levels of an organization, and supports workers who work directly with young people in foster care. The mission statement should have input from all levels of the organization and should include the voices of young people in foster care.

- Support a positive organizational environment for those working with young people by establishing policies that encourage adequate compensation, work-life balance, and professional development.

Building Knowledge and Skills for Finding and Retaining the Right People

This includes expertise and competencies, e.g., practice knowledge, leadership skills, team building, analytic abilities, and cultural competency.

- Educate staff to be culturally competent in youth development and culture. Training should help workers identify their biases and stereotypes concerning young people and youth culture, and training exercises designed to help staff overcome these biases should be developed and implemented. For example, "The Spectrum of Adult Attitudes Toward Young People Questionnaire," found in *The Technology of Prevention Workbook* by William A. Lofquist (1989) can help adult staff explore their ideas about young people. Once workers' attitudes toward young people have been assessed, training activities such as the "Spectrum of Attitudes" Activity can educate workers about the best ways to move past their implicit biases about youth, and promotes workers to brainstorm about the best ways to engage young people.

- Provide training in trauma-informed and trauma-responsive care for staff working with young people to ensure that they are able to get young people in foster care the help they need. For more information, see Youth Engagement Blueprint Series: Using Science and Technology Effectively at the Capacity Building Collaborative Center for States (https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/).

- Make sure that those who work with youth in foster care have a solid understanding of adolescent brain development and the effect that trauma can have on all aspects of a young person's life, including relationships, academics, and other areas. Child welfare workers should be equipped to understand the biological effects of trauma and high levels of toxic stress on young people who were abused or neglected as children (Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation [OPRE], 2015), and to craft programs and policies aligned with the principles of trauma-responsive and developmentally supportive care.

Building Culture and Climate for Finding and Retaining the Right People

This includes norms, beliefs, values, and attitudes that influence behavior, e.g., shared vision, goals, morale and motivation, attitudes, openness, and buy-in for new programs and practices.

- Child welfare organizations should explicitly try to recruit workers and other staff members who view young people as valued resources with much to contribute to an organization's mission.
- Leaders should be committed to programs and practices that support youth engagement, including inviting youth to participate in staff hiring decisions, training and hiring peer advocates, developing Youth Advisory Councils and a Youth Bill of Rights, and including residential alumni on the Board of Directors (Building Bridges Initiative, 2012).
- Institute activities to boost the motivation and morale of child welfare workers involved in youth engagement through positive team building activities and regular time off from work to rest and recharge. This will help avoid burnout among workers, and may boost retention.

Building Partnerships for Finding and Retaining the Right People

This includes inter- and intra-organizational relationships, such as internal teaming, connections, stakeholder involvement, communications, and inter-agency collaboration.

- Identify key champions—those persons from the community who have influence over resources and who are willing to generate support for youth engagement and collaboration with your organization in this area. These can be leaders from government, education, the business sector, faith-based institutions, media outlets, or others (Gaughen, 2009).
- Designate staff to build partnerships with community organizations, media outlets, advocates, and other stakeholders to build a supportive environment for youth and young people currently and formerly in foster care.

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