

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT REMINDERS

“THINK OF [YOUTH ENGAGEMENT] AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO INSPIRE THE FUTURE LEADERS IN THE FIELD. MAKE YOUTH SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE. YOUTH BECOME ENGAGED WHEN THEY SEE THEY CANNOT ONLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR OWN LIVES, BUT IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS TOO!” – ALDO

1. YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IS NOT A “ONE-SIZE FITS ALL” ENDEAVOR.

Though many models exist for engaging youth into programs, there is no “one way” to do this within your own agency. Not all strategies or practices will fit neatly into the services your agency provides—and that’s okay! Take inventory of the strengths and expertise of your agency, and build on those to create meaningful experiences for youth within your programs. After identifying strengths, you can similarly address areas for growth. Incorporate the resources, experiences, and best practices from others to inform your own efforts, knowing that each organization is unique.

2. YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND CAREGIVER ENGAGEMENT ARE NOT NECESSARILY THE SAME THING.

Many agencies that work with youth also work with their caregivers. In these instances, it is important to remember that the viewpoints and wishes of caregivers may differ from the viewpoints and wishes of youth. It is also important to establish clear expectations and boundaries up front with both youth and caregiver to avoid confusion. Caregivers and youth can often offer additional points of view to add value to your organization.

3. THERE IS NO “RIGHT WAY” TO ENGAGE YOUTH IN YOUR PROGRAMS.

When many people think about how to engage youth in programs and services, they may think about establishing youth councils, or having youth participate in board and/or staff meetings. However, there are countless other ways to effectively engage youth, and some may make more sense for your agency than others do. Again, take inventory of your organization’s programs and strengths, and hold focus groups for youth to gain a better understanding of what kind of engagement will work best. By identifying and acknowledging your agency’s strengths and areas for growth, you will be better able to support youth engagement within your programs.

4. REMEMBER TO SUPPORT YOUTH, RESPECT YOUTH, AND MEET YOUTH WHERE THEY ARE.

Youth receiving services and youth informing or providing services may be in two different stages of recovery. It is important to remember this as your agency continues its work with youth engagement. Youth who have come on as staff or interns are not just “youth”; they are also employees and colleagues. Remember that youth voice and youth engagement is a valuable resource to your agency and programs, and can provide a great perspective on the role your organization plays in the community.