

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide network of youth-serving organizations dedicated to partnering with youth and young adults (YYA) to drive meaningful systems change, ensuring better services for Texas' most vulnerable and resilient youth. In October 2023, TNOYS partnered with the Office of the Texas Governor Child Sex Trafficking Team to engage with YYA and providers to assess survivor-informed practices within youth housing and homelessness services.

### High Impact Youth Engagement Strategies:

- **Youth Voice and Decision-Making:** The importance of centering youth in decision-making processes, giving them opportunities to influence policies and practices in their communities and organizations.
- **Youth-Led Trainings and Councils:** A key strategy for empowering youth by giving them leadership roles and meaningful input in organizational decision-making.
- **Youth-led Research (YPAR):** A participatory approach where youth and adults partner to conduct research on issues affecting youth, fostering ownership, responsibility, and self-efficacy among youth participants.

### Defining High-Impact Youth Engagement

High-impact strategies are defined not just by their ability to facilitate youth involvement but by the depth and breadth of their influence. These strategies ensure that youth participation extends across various levels—from individual contributions to organizational decision-making and public influence. This approach aligns with our goals of fostering environments where youth feel genuinely empowered to lead and advocate.

## Impact on Youth and Organizations:

### Breadth of Influence:

Strategies that engage youth on individual and collective levels, maximizing their involvement across different organizational settings.

### Depth of Influence:

Creating high-impact strategies that provide youth with increased responsibility, development, autonomy, and leadership, ensuring they feel empowered and valued for enhanced engagement and long-term success.

## Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

### Understanding the Steps

1. Assessment
2. Recruit YYA Members
3. Build Relationships
4. Develop Critical Awareness
5. Identify Issues
6. Create Research Design
7. Conduct Research
8. Analyze Data
9. Advocate for Change
10. Reflect and Repeat

## Best Practices for Youth Engagement

Key best practices for embedding youth voice in youth-serving organizations include:

- **Building Trust:** Establishing authentic, trusting relationships between youth and adults, which is foundational for successful youth engagement.
- **Compensation:** Fairly compensating youth for their contributions, which demonstrates that their time and expertise are valued.
- **Professional Development:** Providing youth with opportunities for skill-building and leadership development, ensuring their engagement offers tangible, transferable benefits.
- **Flexibility and Individualized Care:** Recognizing that one-size-fits-all approaches often hinder youth progress. Instead, individualized services and care are essential for meeting diverse youth needs.

## YPAR Project Example: Assessment of Survivor-Informed Practices in Youth Housing and Homelessness Services

TNOYS applied the YPAR process to assess the implementation of youth engagement and survivor-informed practices among youth housing and homelessness service providers in Texas.

### Project Objectives:

- Based on input from YYA and providers, identify and understand challenges and best practices for being survivor-informed and engaging youth in services.

- Develop clear and actionable recommendations for youth housing and homelessness services providers to effectively connect YYA to survivor-informed, youth-centered services.
- Ensure these recommendations address the challenges and needs of both providers and YYA, uplift best and promising practices in the field, emphasize youth-adult partnerships and youth voice, and ensure practices are research-based and survivor-informed.

### YPAR In Practice:

**1. Assessment:** Before beginning a YPAR project, it is crucial to evaluate organizational readiness and ensure buy-in from all staff and stakeholders. This stage involves understanding the existing knowledge and attitudes about youth participation and determining the resources available for a successful project.

- Before engaging YYA in this project, TNOYS evaluated its staff capacity and established clear expectations for the project timeline and activities. Leadership and grant funders were brought on board to ensure alignment with project goals. Additionally, TNOYS built on best practices and lessons learned from previous YPAR projects to inform and strengthen the approach.

**2. Recruit YYA Members:** Carefully select YYA who are affected by or have experience with the issues being researched. Recruitment should focus on diverse representation and consider youth's interests and ability to participate meaningfully.

- TNOYS collaborated with members of its Young Adult Leadership Council (YALC) to implement the project. YALC members are youth and young adults aged 16–25 who have lived experience in areas such as child welfare, homelessness, juvenile justice, and survivor services. TNOYS trained YALC members on the YPAR process and roles and responsibilities within the project. TNOYS staff and YALC facilitated listening sessions with YYA receiving services from provider organizations across the state to gather insights on their needs, priorities, and strengths from the YYA perspective.

**3. Build Relationships:** Developing strong, trusting relationships among all participants is foundational. This involves engaging in activities that foster mutual respect and understanding, ensuring all voices are equally valued and heard.

- Each YALC cohort engages with TNOYS for a full 12 months, during which time TNOYS staff intentionally work to build relationships with YALC members. TNOYS staff and YALC members regularly participate in icebreakers, check-ins, games, and times of reflection to help build relationships and foster trust and security.
- YALC also played a key role in establishing a comfortable and supportive environment for the YYA participants involved in this project. YALC members supported content development for the listening sessions by informing and providing feedback on materials such as scripts, slides, and questions to ensure accessibility. They also created and facilitated icebreakers to build engagement. Because of their own lived expertise, YALC members were well-prepared to share space with other YYA survivors, fostering openness and mutual respect and ensuring all voices were heard and valued.

**4. Develop Critical Awareness:** Participants should understand the social, political, and environmental factors affecting their communities. This step involves educational sessions that empower youth to identify and articulate issues affecting them.

- All YALC members are engaged in an extensive program curriculum that provides a baseline understanding of each of the seven systems in which TNOYS works including CSEY and survivor services. These educational sessions are important for all YALC members, whether or not they have lived experience within a specific system. The sessions can help them understand and contextualize their own experience, expand their knowledge of their peers' experiences, and help them identify key intersections. With this foundation, YALC members have the confidence and knowledge to more actively participate and co-lead in the YPAR process.
- Before conducting listening sessions, TNOYS provided the YYA participants with key insights about the project and its scope, ensuring they were equipped with the necessary knowledge to understand the issues at hand and contribute meaningfully to the discussions.

**5. Identify Issues:** Together, youth and adults identify and prioritize issues to be researched. This collaborative process ensures the research focus is relevant and impactful.

- TNOYS involved YALC throughout the planning process, partnering with them to develop content and identify key issues relevant to the project. This approach ensured that the project was aligned with the priorities and perspectives of both the YALC and the broader YYA participants.

**6. Create Research Design:** Design the research methodology collaboratively, ensuring that the methods chosen are appropriate for the questions being asked and the resources available. This might include surveys, interviews, focus groups, or observational studies.

- TNOYS provided YALC with ongoing training in the various research methods used throughout the project. This equipped YALC members to integrate with and co-lead alongside adults and YYA/survivors.

**7. Conduct Research:** Implement the research plan with youth taking an active role in collecting and documenting data. Adult facilitators provide support and ensure the research adheres to ethical standards.

- During the listening sessions, TNOYS staff and YALC collected data from participants for later analysis. YALC facilitated discussions, took notes, and held similar roles in the data collection process.

**8. Analyze Data:** Analyze the collected data to identify trends, patterns, and insights. Youth participants should be involved in this process to help interpret findings and learn analytical skills.

- YALC members received training in thematic analysis and then applied these new skills to analyze the data collected, identify trends and themes, and draw conclusions. Their lived expertise provided nuanced insights during the analysis, allowing TNOYS to draw more comprehensive conclusions from the data.

**9. Advocate for Change:** Use the research findings to advocate for policy changes, program improvements, or community awareness. This step involves preparing presentations, reports, or other dissemination materials that effectively communicate the research outcomes.

- TNOYS staff and YALC members collaborated to prepare presentations and reports to communicate our research outcomes and advocate for improvements in both policies and practices.

**10. Reflect & Repeat:** After completing the research cycle, reflect on the process and outcomes. Identify lessons learned and areas for improvement, and plan for future YPAR projects.

- TNOYS conducted a full project debrief with the YALC, reflecting on the entire project. This included the listening sessions, data analysis, and overall process. This debrief allowed the team to highlight best practices, address barriers, and identify opportunities for growth in future initiatives. Additionally, TNOYS presented our findings to the YYA listening session participants, ensuring their ongoing engagement and confirming that the data accurately reflected their needs and perspectives. Once validated, the research findings were finalized and prepared for dissemination to inform broader advocacy efforts.

## Assessment of Survivor-Informed Practices Project Findings:

- **Youth Autonomy and Youth Voice:** Youth regain power and self-efficacy when involved in decision-making processes, yet these opportunities are often limited, leaving their needs dismissed or ignored.
- **Youth Wants and Needs:** YYA know exactly what they need (and don't need) to be successful.
- **Push and Pull Factors:** Supportive resources such as financial assistance, transportation, and housing pull youth towards services, while restrictive rules, inflexibility, and complex barriers push them away, limiting their ability to progress.
- **Individualized Approach:** Youth thrive in environments where their individual needs and circumstances are recognized, as opposed to rigid, one-size-fits-all service models.
- **Relationships with Providers:** Building trust and genuine connections with providers is essential for youth, who often feel judged, misunderstood, and under-supported in their relationships with service providers.

By centering youth voice and survivor-informed practices, we strengthen the capacity of youth-serving organizations across Texas. Through collaboration, empowerment, and high-impact strategies, we ensure that youth are valued leaders in shaping systems that truly meet their needs.