



**COLORADO**  
Department of Public  
Health & Environment

# The Value of Youth Advisors

Promoting Promising Practices  
to Help Youth and Young Adults  
Reach Their Full Potential



This project was supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant number B04MC28087, Maternal and Child Health Services. This information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.



## Implementing an Innovative Practice: Youth Advisor Model

In 2012, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) hired two young people as part of its Youth and Young Adult Unit in an effort to further integrate a *positive youth development approach*<sup>1</sup> into their programs and initiatives. These “youth advisors” were hired as part-time employees so they could actively participate in the development, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies affecting youth and young adults across Colorado. While having young people serve as interns is a more common practice, hiring young people as employees to guide programming within a state agency is virtually unheard of across the country. In Colorado, department staff developed an innovative “Youth Advisor Model” in order to authentically partner with young people on an ongoing, more regular basis. Hiring young people as employees of the department allowed the youth to have a greater influence on decision making and created more opportunities for them to represent youth needs and perspectives.

To put this model into action, department staff worked closely with their agency’s Human Resource staff and the Colorado Department of Personnel and Administration to address the challenges and questions related to hiring young people (between the ages 16-21) in a state system and ensure that the agency could support their work effectively. Much of this entailed training other staff on how to engage with the Youth Advisors and the “value add” of partnering with them in programs and initiatives related to youth health and well-being. The youth advisors are part of the department’s Children, Youth and Families Branch and are funded primarily through the state’s Maternal and Child Health Block Grant. This funding, in addition to other sources within the Prevention Services Division, pays personnel costs and supports evaluation of how the model works within a state governmental agency.

## What is the Role of the Youth Advisor?

At the department, the youth advisors work 20 hours per week providing the youth perspective through partnership in decision-making and guidance on current programs and initiatives, including youth sexual health and youth-systems building for the Maternal and Child Health Program. In addition, they engage diverse youth from across Colorado to obtain feedback on projects related to the department and its partners for ongoing quality improvement. The model allows the youth advisors to be present during traditional business hours and available for consultation as needed. As a result of increasing requests for partnership with the youth advisors, “office hours” were created to ensure access to quality, trained young people with the capacity to provide meaningful and relevant insights, enhancing a programs ability to reach the broader youth population more effectively.

### <sup>1</sup> POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

An evidence-based, public health strategy that incorporates the development of skills, opportunities and authentic relationships into programs, practices and policies, so that young people reach their full potential.

This approach depicts youth and young adults as resources to cultivate, as opposed to problems to fix and is dependent upon the use of the following guiding principles:

- Strengths-based approach,
- Inclusive of all youth,
- Engages youth as partners,
- Collaboration and
- Sustainability.

## EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS IN 2013-2014 INCLUDE:

- ◆ Conducting workshops and presentations on the principles of Positive Youth Development, outlining what it means to be culturally responsive and why it is important to young people.
- ◆ Co-leading the development of Colorado's youth system, Colorado 9to25 (CO9to25), including the logo, tag line and infographic.
- ◆ Representing young people on the state committee selected for developing the new youth development plan required by state legislation to help fund initiatives and programs to improve the health and well-being of all Colorado youth.
- ◆ Planning and facilitating a CO9to25 and Youth Sexual Health Call to Action Launch in rural Northeast Colorado in partnership with the local health department and community partners.
- ◆ Assisting in the hiring of agency staff members who work with and on behalf of young people.
- ◆ Reviewing grant applications for a variety of prevention and intervention programs.

## Components of the Youth Advisor Model

To create an environment most conducive to positive outcomes (for programs, youth advisors and their supervisors), the following components, grounded in Positive Youth Development (PYD), were implemented and found to be critical to the success of the Model:

### Supportive, Youth-friendly Supervisor and Mentors

Supportive, youth-friendly supervisors and mentors are staff who value and have experience engaging young people in partnerships and who can be a consistent advocate for valuing the youth advisor's perspective. Opportunities to serve as an ally may exist during meetings or conversations both with and without the youth advisor present. Supervising a youth employee includes traditional supervisory tasks, however these tasks are typically more frequent, time-intensive and intentional. Supervisors should set aside time for consistent, frequent, and ongoing supervision, to promote a mutually beneficial relationship, communicate clear and high expectations for accomplishing the work and provide time and space for critical thinking on issues related to their work. In addition, supervising a youth advisor requires flexibility, and entails supporting them personally as they develop skills that are meaningful and transferable to various aspects of their life, such as how to approach crucial conversations and enhance communication skills.

### Logistics

Youth advisors are employees and it is important to treat them as such by providing them adequate office space, computer and phone access, as well as employee incentives such as cell-phone reimbursements and access to work-related travel opportunities. Equipping youth advisors with the tools they need to most effectively fulfill the expectations of their roles, enhances the sense of legitimacy of their job, the work they are doing, and increases their level of professionalism both personally, as well as amongst their colleagues. These tools also include a clear job description, workplan, annual goals and formal evaluations.

# The Value of Youth Advisors

## Experiential Learning Opportunities

Orientation and trainings should allow for the youth advisor to learn by doing. This can include orienting themselves to topic areas critical to the work, such as PYD, by researching and creating their own innovative way of presenting the information to demonstrate not only knowledge, but application of the information as well. Youth advisors should have access to trainings such as Crucial Conversations.

## Power in Numbers

It is recommended that when hiring youth advisors, that hiring more than one be considered. If this is not a possibility it is important to help a youth advisor create a community with other youth advisors in similar positions, even if employed by different organizations. This creates community, camaraderie and opportunities for collaboration on joint projects.

## COMPONENTS OF THE YOUTH ADVISOR MODEL

- Supportive, youth-friendly supervisor and mentors available for youth advisors.
- Inviting and adequate work environment.
- Employee incentives such as reimbursements and travel opportunities.
- The necessary tools to complete their work such as a workplan and clear goals.
- Experiential learning opportunities.
- Hiring more than one youth advisor at a time.

## Establishing Organizational Readiness

Preparing an organization and staff for the arrival of young people as employees is equally as important as preparing the youth advisors themselves.

### Policy

Creating, approving and sharing policies and guidance related to creating youth-friendly work environments helps shift or enhance a work culture towards one that holds value for young people informing and partnering in the work. Youth-Adult Partnerships are not simply a box to check off, but rather a way in which an organization does its work.

### Budget

Youth advisor positions should be written with a sustainability plan in mind, so as to support the ongoing priority of hiring and partnering with young people, ultimately institutionalizing this practice.

## Creating a Culture Shift

Working in partnerships with youth advisors can require a change in the way business is done. This can include how meetings and trainings are facilitated, and how jobs are posted, recruitment is done and interviews are held. Other staff benefit from having trainings on the value of youth advisors, as well as on how and when to engage them. Departments supporting hiring youth advisors can prepare for their arrival by creating and promoting a department-wide Youth Friendly Guidance.

## Evaluating the Youth Advisor Model

In 2013, the Children, Youth and Families Branch worked with the Health Statistics and Evaluation Branch to conduct an evaluation of the Youth Advisor Model. The intent was to inform what has changed due to hiring youth advisors, what is working well, what needs improvement, how the model can be replicated in various settings and to identify training needs.

The evaluation design included these three questions:

- ◆ How is the Youth Advisor Model actually performing in practice?
- ◆ Which aspects can be replicated by others?
- ◆ What could be done to improve the model?

To answer the evaluation questions, an online survey and in-depth interviews were conducted with key audiences in spring and summer 2014.

The youth advisor survey items were included in a survey that asked questions regarding the Youth Advisor Model to just over 60 participants from CO9to25's Steering Committee, the Colorado Youth Sexual Health Team and youth-serving staff within the department.

Survey items that assess the department's Youth Advisor Model were developed based on a review of the literature surrounding youth engagement, previously conducted by the department. Twenty statements were written that express key benefits and best practices found in the literature regarding youth advisors. Department staff and partners were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each benefit or best practice and the extent to which the department's current Youth Advisor Model is achieving these benefits and/or best practices and readiness to implement each best practice.

The twenty statements were classified into categories, as follows, and results are grouped by these categories:

- ◆ Benefits of youth advisors
- ◆ Process and structure
- ◆ Adult involvement
- ◆ Organizational involvement

Additional data was collected through in-depth interviews with the department's youth advisors themselves and with the department program staff who oversee their work. The primary purpose of the interviews were to better understand the nature of the partnership with youth advisors at the department, to gather more detailed and concrete suggestions for improving implementation of the model within the department, and for replicating efforts in other organizations.



## Findings: How is the Youth Advisor Model Working?

### Overarching Findings

Per the survey results, the department succeeded in communicating the benefits and gaining buy-in and support regarding the Youth Advisor Model to others within the department and CO9to25 Leadership.

### Youth Advisor Model performing in practice at CDPHE

Results indicate that about five of 20 benefits and best practices are already in place (green cells in Table 1), with progress being made on the other 15. **This suggests that the current Youth Advisor Model is beginning to add value to the work done at CDPHE.**

Note: Cells in Tables 1 and 2 are color-coded according to scoring with green being highest rated (4.0 or higher), yellow in the mid-range (3.0 or higher) and red in the low-range (below 3.0).

### Replicating the Youth Advisor Model

Replicating the current model in other state agencies, branches, programs or organizations may be feasible, based on the overall survey findings. Ratings on readiness to implement Youth Advisor best practices were generally lower than those for agreement with them, suggesting that **partners agree with the best practices slightly more than they are ready to implement them.**

Although none of the best practices were rated at the high-end of the scale for readiness, the results suggest that partners are somewhat prepared to implement the best practices outlined in Table 2. Partners feel most prepared to advocate for and train on youth-adult partnerships. **Partners are least prepared to dedicate the resources necessary to support youth advisors.**

**Table 1: Benefits and Best Practices**

Benefits of Youth Advisors	Process and Structure	Adult Involvement	Organizational Involvement
Improve programming (4.1)	Effective training and preparation (4.0)	Adults dedicate adequate time and skills to train youth (4.2)	Willing to create youth friendly procedures and policies. (3.4)
Unique experience (4.0)	Clear roles, goals and expectations (3.6)	Share decision-making authority (4.0)	Commitment for Youth Advisors from the highest levels (3.3)
Diverse perspectives (3.8)	Core priority (3.6)	Adults advocate for youth-adult partnerships (3.9)	Flexible to meet the needs of Youth Advisors (3.2)
Relevant and responsive programming (3.8)	Connected with larger initiatives (3.5)	Adults have clear roles/expectations for working with youth (3.6)	Resources to support Youth Advisors (3.2)
	Encouragement of self-expression and youth culture (3.2)	Adults receive training and preparation (3.4)	Help potential supporters identify impact of Youth Advisors Model (3.2)
		Adults provide training to colleagues (3.3)	

Table 1: Youth Advisor Model Performing in Practice at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Department, Average "Achievement Ratings" (1=not at all; 5=very much).

## Findings, cont.

### Improvements to the Model

Findings suggest that implementation of the Youth Advisor Model could be improved by taking action to increase organizational understanding about the role of youth advisors, garnering increased commitment and support from department leadership, and by effectively preparing adults to partner with young people.

Almost two-thirds of the partners who completed the survey indicated that they would like training on the model (63%), and training was a common suggestion for improvement across the best practices categories.

Suggestions were made for improving the Youth Advisor Model. Across the best practices categories, four themes for improvement emerged:

#### ◆ Increase adults' exposure to youth advisors.

Because staff may not be experienced working directly with young people, involve youth advisors in existing internal teams and/or meetings (such as staff meetings). This may help other staff increase their comfort and confidence in working with youth advisors.

#### ◆ Youth advisors should establish more external connections.

Organizations can get experience working with a youth advisor when they partner with organizations that already

**Table 2: Best Practices**

Process and Structure	Adult Involvement	Organizational Involvement
Making Youth Advisors a core priority (3.4)	Adults advocate for youth-adult partnerships (3.8)	Commitment for Youth Advisors from the highest levels (3.6)
Encouragement of self-expression and youth culture (3.4)	Adults receive training and preparation (3.6)	Flexible to meet the needs of Youth Advisors (3.5)
Connected with larger initiatives (3.2)	Adults dedicate adequate time and skills to train youth (3.5)	Willing to create youth friendly procedures and policies.(3.3)
Clear roles, goals and expectations (3.2)	Adults have clear roles/expectations for working with youth (3.5)	Help potential supporters identify impact of Youth Advisors Model (3.2)
Effective training and preparation (3.1)	Share decision-making authority (3.5)	Resources to support Youth Advisors (2.9)
	Adults provide training to colleagues (3.4)	

**Table 2: Readiness to Replicate Aspects of the Model- Average "Readiness Ratings" (1=not at all ready; 5=very ready)**

Note: Cells in Tables 1 and 2 were color-coded according to scoring with green being highest rated (4.0 or higher), yellow in the mid-range (3.0 or higher) and red in the low-range (below 3.0).



# The Value of Youth Advisors

have youth advisors. The Colorado Department of Human Services is, for example, receiving assistance from the CDPHE's youth advisor. Expanding connections to other agencies such as the Department of Higher Education and Colorado Department of Education was suggested.

## ◆ Youth advisors should work on some projects as truly equal partners.

Create opportunities for shared partnership by having youth advisors work with colleagues with equal power, not just work with his or her supervisor. Avoid assigning youth advisors to only projects being overseen by their supervisor to provide exposure to a wide range of work styles and situations. Another example of an approach is to include youth advisors on interview committees or other groups where equal partnering is likely.

## ◆ Train adult staff.

Provide training for staff that addresses:

- How to contact and work with the department's youth advisors
- How to listen to youth advisors
- Valuing youth advisors as employees
- Awareness and understanding of the value of youth advisors
- How to engage youth advisors in decision-making
- How youth advisors can specifically be applicable to the different programs at the department



## Conclusion and Next Steps

The evaluation of the Youth Advisor Model at the department showed that the agency is realizing some of benefits anticipated with the implementation of the model. In general, the findings indicate that youth advisors are helping to improve programming at the department and that they are providing a unique expertise and perspective that other staff cannot replace or provide. Some respondents are also experiencing the benefits that youth advisors can bring in terms of diversity in decision-making and adding relevance and responsiveness to programs and services, however more can be done to help the organization fully realize these benefits.

The process and structure of the department's Youth Advisor Model appears to be functioning well. The findings suggest that the department is effectively providing the training and preparation necessary for youth advisors to fulfill their role. It also appears that youth advisors have some guidance in place to assure clarity of expectations. There is some agreement amongst respondents that the youth advisors are viewed as a core priority in their work areas and that their projects are connected with larger initiatives. The department can continue to improve by encouraging and validating creative forms of self-expression and youth culture.

To improve the readiness for other organizations to embrace the Youth Advisor Model, the department can help increase partner's exposure to working with youth to increase their comfort with engaging young people, ensure that the youth advisors are working with partners in other organizations, and develop ongoing professional development opportunities on using a Youth Advisor Model based on the department's experience and best practices.

The strategy to expand the Youth Advisor Model is being embraced locally and at the state and national levels. The following organizations have or are interested in hiring youth advisors:

- Denver Public Health
- Colorado State Board of Health
- Colorado Department of Human Services
- Colorado Department of Education
- Colorado 9to25
- Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs
- CityMATCH
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health

The findings from this evaluation and other youth engagement best practice continue to be promoted and shared through CO9to25. To learn more or to join the effort, log on to [www.co9to25.org](http://www.co9to25.org).



**COLORADO**  
Department of Public  
Health & Environment

Contact Audra Bishop with questions about youth advisors: [audra.bishop@state.co.us](mailto:audra.bishop@state.co.us)