



# Promoting Youth Engagement Through Youth Councils: Tips for Getting Started

by Rebecca Makar and Michael Karpman

**Y**oung people are our nation's greatest asset. Municipal leaders have found that by giving youth a voice in shaping decisions that affect their lives, cities can craft smarter policies and solutions to key youth issues. Furthermore, young people who are involved in positive activities are less likely to abuse alcohol or drugs, commit crimes, become pregnant or engage in other risky behavior.

Youth present local governments with exciting opportunities – and significant challenges – when it comes to engaging them in the community and the civic process. Youth culture, trends, language and style can seem foreign to adults. City leaders often wonder: How can we reach our youth? How can we provide them with positive activities when they aren't in school?

Many cities are discovering that when they set up youth councils and offer other meaningful leadership opportunities, young people want to be involved and will recruit their peers to join them.

Youth councils are a popular and powerful way to promote young people's participation in local government, helping them:

- Learn firsthand about how government works;
- Gain leadership experience and new skills, such as public speaking and working in teams;
- Develop a sense of responsibility, belonging, confidence and empowerment; and
- Realize that their voices matter and that they can improve their communities.

Here are some ideas for getting started:

**1 Begin by assessing young people's interests.** Young people should be involved from the outset. An essential first step is to find a small but diverse group of key young people (collaboration with schools can help facilitate this process) who can work with a designated staff person to

gauge youth interest and solicit their perspectives through surveys, meetings or focus groups.

**2 Define the youth council's structure, roles and responsibilities.** Under what structure and guidelines will the youth council operate? What will be the duties and limitations of the council? Will the youth council meet regularly with the mayor or city council? Will members sit on any city boards or commissions? What application process will the youth council use? What ages will be set for the young people serving on the council? How will the youth council be staffed? Will the youth council have a small budget? Since youth councils have existed in many cities for some time, experienced cities can “mentor” communities that are new to the process, sharing what has and has not worked. Neighboring cities or the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education and Families can offer sample applications for a youth council, youth council bylaws and local ordinances to form youth councils.

**3 Encourage a diverse group of young people to apply.** After creating a short application, it will be important to spread the word about this opportunity. Collaboration with schools, as well as Boys and Girls Clubs, the YMCA and other youth-serving organizations, is an effective way to encourage youth of diverse backgrounds to apply for membership. Young people also need a realistic sense of the time commitment and work involved, as well as the benefits of participating.

**4 Work with youth to set the agenda and activities of the youth council.** At the first meeting, young people and adult advisers can work together to set an agenda and a regular schedule of meetings. Youth need to articulate what they want to focus on. Sometimes “youth issues” are not what adults assume. Meetings themselves should be youth-

Continued from page 32

friendly (i.e., allowing time for young people's input and avoiding the use of jargon terms), and the time and location must be realistic for youth to attend. Some questions to consider: Will the youth council organize a youth summit to gather ideas? Would it be useful to organize a youth mapping project to identify services available in each neighborhood, or would a survey of young people's attitudes be useful? Is the council interested in volunteer projects? If so, launching a project on National Youth Service Day ([www.ysa.org](http://www.ysa.org)) is one great way to start.

**Provide training for both young people and adults.**

Youth and adults involved with a youth council can benefit from some form of training. Young people may need to learn about "Municipal Government 101," the local budgeting and policy processes, how to participate effectively in meetings, and how to plan and carry out activities. Adults need to be more aware about practicing youth-development principles. Some questions to consider: Are there community organizations that already specialize in providing training on youth-adult partnerships? Can the Florida League of Cities' educational materials on how local government works ([www.flcities.com/i\\_am\\_teacher.asp](http://www.flcities.com/i_am_teacher.asp)) be utilized? Could

local United Ways; service clubs; or college departments of government, politics, law or communications assist with research, training or strategic planning? National groups such as the Institute for Youth, Education and Families and the Search Institute ([www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)) also offer helpful training materials.

**Raise awareness of the youth council to promote future applications.** Youth summits can offer a larger group of young people a chance to discuss pressing local concerns. Youth should have input into designing the theme, workshops, marketing, logistics, time and location. Some city leaders creatively use the media and advertising to reach young people and their parents. Other ways of reaching them are through surveys or organized service projects. For each activity, opportunities for reflection are critical.

**Institutionalize youth involvement.** Cities must make youth councils sustainable beyond the tenure of young people and adults currently involved. Some cities formalize their commitments through executive orders or city-council resolutions. Internal bylaws can establish governance standards and membership and recruitment responsibilities. While youth councils typically do not cost much money, a fundraising plan or modest budget can signal a long-term commitment to youth participation. Finally, regular meet-

# Five Unique Youth

## 1. Caldwell, Idaho:

Created in 1999, the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council (<http://city.cityofcaldwell.com/page/47727/>) includes high school students who apply through the school counselor's office. Monthly meetings are held at City Hall and are attended by the mayor, advisory staff and other community members. The council volunteers many hours of community service, promotes community activism and organizes youth events. The council also has created a toolkit to help cities organize their own youth councils ([www.nlc.org/content/files/IYEF\\_Mayor\\_Nancolas\\_Toolkit.pdf](http://www.nlc.org/content/files/IYEF_Mayor_Nancolas_Toolkit.pdf)).

## 2. Hampton, Virginia:

Coordinated by the Hampton Coalition for Youth ([www.hampton.gov/foryouth/](http://www.hampton.gov/foryouth/)), the Hampton Youth Commission ([www.hampton.va.us/youth/](http://www.hampton.va.us/youth/)) is composed of 24 young people from four public and two private high schools. Commission members assist with the implementation of youth-related components in the city's comprehensive plan, appropriate funding for youth activities, work directly with the planning department, and serve on municipal boards and commissions. The Hampton Youth Commission has developed an eight-minute video and 56-page manual for cities interested in "how to start or improve your youth commission."

ings with city officials demonstrate a genuine interest in listening to young people's voices when determining local priorities and plans.

The Institute for Youth, Education and Families is compiling a list of youth councils in each state on its Web site at [www.nlc.org/iyef/youth\\_as\\_city\\_leaders](http://www.nlc.org/iyef/youth_as_city_leaders). The institute soon will offer more-detailed Web-based resources for starting a youth council, with city examples and sample resolutions, proclamations, letters, agendas and budgets.

For more information on starting a youth council, contact Rebecca Makar at (202) 626-3046 or [makar@nlc.org](mailto:makar@nlc.org).

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## The Institute for Youth, Education and Families Offers Additional Help to Cities

The Institute for Youth, Education and Families at the National League of Cities helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of children and families in their communities. In addition to helping city officials promote youth participation in local government, the institute provides information, training, technical assistance and networking opportunities on a broad range of issues, including improving education and after-school programs; re-engaging disconnected youth; promoting family economic success; strengthening early childhood development; combating childhood obesity; protecting youth safety and reducing gang participation; and promoting "City Platform for Strengthening Families and Improving Outcomes for Children and Youths," which outlines four essential tasks for sustained progress.

To learn how the institute can assist your city, visit [www.nlc.org/iyef](http://www.nlc.org/iyef) or contact Michael Karpman at (202) 626-3072 or [karpman@nlc.org](mailto:karpman@nlc.org).

# Councils

### 3. Tampa, Florida:

The Tampa Mayor's Youth Corps ([www.tampagov.net/dept\\_parks/mayors\\_youth\\_corps/](http://www.tampagov.net/dept_parks/mayors_youth_corps/)) involves students from each high school who communicate with the mayor and participate in service activities. The Youth Corps also has its own television show on the city's local cable access channel to offer a youth perspective on city issues. Lead stories have focused on the local food bank, a shelter for abused women and children, and promotion of youth events.

### 4. Rock Hill, South

**Carolina:** Made up of 25 high school students, the Rock Hill Youth Council ([www.rockhillrocks.com](http://www.rockhillrocks.com) under "Programs" then "Youth") organizes a number of activities such as allocating grants to local youth for service projects in the city. Youth must attend an Application Workshop Day to learn about the grant application process and to be eligible to apply for funds. The youth council also encourages local youth organizations to contribute at least four hours of community service during its annual Youth Service Weekend, launching the weekend with a kick-off event that attracts more than 200 youth.

### 5. Casper, Wyoming:

The Casper Youth Empowerment Council ([www.wyomingmedicalcenterfoundation.org/prog\\_yec.php](http://www.wyomingmedicalcenterfoundation.org/prog_yec.php)) plays an advisory role to the school district, City Council and local hospital foundation. The council's activities include sponsoring concerts to raise awareness about drug abuse and suicide and to promote volunteerism; hosting safety forums and developing small mentoring groups in each high school; helping complete the Casper Skate Park; helping develop and pass legislation allowing 16-year-olds to work in polling places; and providing grants to youth groups for community service and leadership training.