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**Institute for Youth, Education, and Families**

*A Seat at the Table: Engaging Youth as City Leaders*  
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Institute for Youth, Education, and Families  
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*Speakers:*

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**Matthew Rivera**, chair, Chase Youth Commission, City of Spokane, Wash.  
**Chris Tan**, assistant director, Office on Youth Development, City of Newport News, Va.

**ANDREWS:** Good afternoon to everyone, regardless of what coast you are on right now. I would like to welcome you to our monthly audioconference series here at the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. Today we will be discussing the workshop topic on “A Seat at the Table, Engaging Youth as City Leaders.” I am very excited to have a great panel with us. Joanne Benham is the director the Spokane Regional Youth Development, in Spokane, Washington. We have Matthew Rivera, the chair of the Chase Youth Commission in Spokane, and we also have Chris Tan, who is the assistant director at the Office on Youth Development in Newport News, Va.

I would like to go over just a couple of house rules before we begin. We are going to ask Joanne, Matthew, and Chris to provide some of their insights to a very important question on how they have taken efforts in their city to engage young people and, really, in a very informal way, have them speak to one another and also to give a little summary on the work that they are doing, and throughout their conversation, we will try to infuse, after the summaries, comments or questions that are coming from those that are on the call. So, at this time, I would like to turn it over to Joanne. Joanne, if you can get started for us, not only giving us a little background on who you are, but really begin the discussion on the broader question that deals with how youth are engaged in your city, describe what it looks like for youth in Spokane, Washington, to have a seat at the table. So, welcome, Joanne.

**BENHAM:** Well, thank you. It is a pleasure to be here today. I guess I would say that I started in this business, 20 years ago as the Spokane Regional Youth Director, but prior to that, I was an educator, so I have an education background and I also worked at the American Red Cross with youth and engaging them in the work of the Red Cross. So, that is my background. My passion is really youth involvement. So, it was a great fit when our city decided to start a youth commission. The commission, however, now is both a joint city and county agency and that is why we call ourselves the Spokane Regional Youth Department.

The Chase Youth Commission was named after former Mayor Chase, who was instrumental in getting the commission launched. The commission has always been a youth/adult partnership, meaning that we have both youth and adults on the commission itself, but I would say that the makeup of the commission has changed over the 20 years. We started with two youth and five adults. We now have 15 members on the commission with seven youth and eight adults. So, we have tried to make it more equalized so that the youth voice is much stronger.

We also have another arm that we call the teen advisory council and those teens do not have to be appointed like the commissioners do, but they just simply have to have an interest in making the community a better place to live and with that, we work with usually about 40 or so teens and then we also have a nonprofit arm called the Chase Youth Foundation and they are private individuals who form a separate board and they raise money to augment our tax dollars and support the work of the Youth Commission. So, we have a multifaceted operation, but it really helps to bring in the community in a much bigger way to help our work.

*ANDREWS:* And how large is the teen advisory council?

*BENHAM:* Actually, that started alongside the Youth Commission back in the very beginning. The foundation is newer. That was something that we started in 1993.

*ANDREWS:* And so the number of youths that are on the Youth Advisory Council, is it the same 15 youth or is it a different number of youth?

*BENHAM:* No, they are different youths. We have had as many as over 100 in one year. It is kind of just a matter of who steps up, what kind of interest there is, what projects we are doing and these students really are our volunteer workforce, but the projects have emerged from their interests, things that they have suggested. For instance, we have a Battle of the Bands every year, because we do not have enough venues for local bands to play, so we have created an opportunity for them to do that. We have a youth award ceremony every year where we honor over 2,000 young people who make a difference in our community, grades K-12, and that emerged out of an interest in having a better understanding of what the youth do in our community and a better perspective about youth, so they are seen as resources rather than problems. And those are just a couple of things that we do. We have regular interaction with elected officials, but teens are very instrumental in organizing all of those events.

*ANDREWS:* Great, and so, there is a Youth Commission in Spokane and then there is also a Teen Advisory Council and then a Chase Youth Commission. Did I get that right?

*BENHAM:* Well, the Chase Youth Commission is the appointed body and they are appointed by elected officials, either county commissioner or city council, depending on where they live, and then the foundation is a separate non-profit organization and then the Teen Advisory Council.

*ANDREWS:* Great, and then the foundation is not a youth-led foundation, but it is a youth-focused foundation.

*BENHAM:* Right. That is not youth led, in part, by law, because in Washington State, because of the financial liabilities, you cannot have anyone under 18 on those.

*ANDREWS:* Ah. Great. So, can you talk a little bit about the efforts to have young people have a seat at the table through the Teen Advisory Council and the Chase Youth Commission? How does that look on the ground and from the work that you have been doing there?

*BENHAM:* Well, we work really hard on building relationships between elected officials, in particular, or candidates for election. We have a youth forum every year, where the candidates come and the students ask questions about what they would do if elected and then we have a mock vote, so we begin that relationship-building before they are actually even in office and then later on we hold an event where any elected official can come and interact with young people around different issues that are of importance to them. So, we have had judges and county auditors and all manners of elected officials. School board members come to participate in that discussion so they hear what the youth have to say.

Also, we have other ways that youth are involved, not so much in a group setting, but more one on one through internships. We have college students who come and do class projects for the city, fulfilling their requirements. Sometimes it is service learning. We have explorers at the police department so youth who are interested in law enforcement have exposure and they are doing police department work. So, there is really a whole manner of ways that young people come into City Hall and engage in the work that we do.

*ANDREWS:* That's great. So the buy-in seems to happen at different levels within the city in terms of city agencies that see the value of having youth have a seat at the table from their lens. Can you talk about how that happened? This has been happening over the last 20 years or so and it is one thing to kind of be where you are 20 years later, but it is another thing to kind of say, you know, we were not always here. So, can you talk a little bit about the evolution of the work of youth having a seat at the table?

*BENHAM:* Well, I think it is vastly different now than it was in the beginning. When I started, it was pretty foreign to have young people even set foot into City Hall and be welcomed, so it was not easy and changing adult attitudes about youth was kind of the first step – having them seen as capable of understanding even what the city does, of being able to contribute. It was a lot of work and I would say that mainly the way we did that was leading by example. So, through the Youth Commission, having youth commissioners being very present and visible, demonstrating what they are capable of doing, helped to change minds a little bit.

Offering ourselves to other departments, helping them with some of their work, also has brought in students to city department head meetings and you know, a city has a very diverse kind of work force. We do everything from picking up the garbage to giving parking tickets, but we also work with youth through parks and rec and community development. So we look for those departments that actually affect youth more directly, that youth are interested in and look for ways that they can give input and advice to some of that programming. But it is still a struggle. Each department has its own culture and you have to work through that. So, some are more youth-friendly than others, but I see that changing day by day.

*ANDREWS:* And so, how many departments or agencies would you say, you know, where are you know as to the number of department/agencies that have taken steps to engage, how has that evolved over the last 20 years?

*BENHAM:* Well, we have a new director for our workforce development council and he is extremely interested. They have a youth council, but I would say that their youth council has not been youth led and that is typically the case in a lot of the communities where they have youth involvement, but not necessarily youth leadership. So, we are trying to influence that as best we can by working together with them. So, it sometimes helps when there is a change in leadership. Because sometimes the people have been there a long time and they do not necessarily have that willingness to go that route, so it is more difficult, but when there is that change in leadership, then you have an opportunity if you get right in there in the beginning when they are new to propose that there might be other ways of doing business, then you have that chance. I would say that our community agencies are sometimes more quick to work in that way than within the city itself. Matthew, do you want to add anything to that?

*RIVERA:* Well....

*BENHAM:* Talk about the school board. I know that that is not a city agency, but they have youth leadership now, too.

*ANDREWS:* So, Matthew, your role for the Chase Youth Commission brings a great youth lens on how you feel youth are being treated and responded to by adults in the city. So your lens is really helpful to talk about the challenges that you feel that youth faced in terms of assuming leadership roles, or having a seat at the table, and some of the great opportunities and success stories in Spokane.

*RIVERA:* When I first got involved in the commission, I did not really have a clue really what it meant to be the leader of a commission like this and it taught me a lot about leadership. I thought leadership really was – you put on events. You show up. You do the things that are shown that people see, but what I learned was that there is so much that is under the table that you have to do and I guess it is called servant leadership. You know, I have to fill the gap. There are different committees, different projects, and different events that I am not leading but I am kind of looking over and sometimes I feel like a leader, but I also feel like I am working for everyone else. I help resource them if they need more people. I look over projects and whatnot and try to find the pieces that are missing. That was a real experience for me finding out that as a leader, I am working more for other people than I ever have before.

*ANDREWS:* How many youth are part of the Chase Youth Commission?

*RIVERA:* There are seven youth and eight adults, but the great part about it is as you heard earlier, I am the chair of the commission, so it is led by a youth and together, me and Joanne, we plan the agendas. We schedule people who come and make presentations and you know, by the same token, there are people that sometimes fall through and last minute, in a half hour, we are trying to find stuff to fill the time with. So, as the chair, you know, there is just a lot of different stuff to do.

*ANDREWS:* Matthew, what does a typical agenda look like for the Chase Youth Commission?

*RIVERA:* A typical agenda, you know, we start with our icebreaker and get that out of the way, but after that we often have people making presentations, new programs that are getting started or off the ground, and they want the support of the commission. As the commission, we are throughout the community and they want us to help them to get the publicity out. Oh, we also have committee reports. The Chase Youth Commission and the Teen Advisory Council are really connected and a lot of what the Teen Advisory Council is doing, – they will come and let the commission know and the commission will get involved. There is really an interconnectivity that is happening. They will let us know what is happening with the Battle of the Bands that Joanne talked about and the Youth Awards and the Youth Issues Forum. So there is just a plurality of events and just trying to ... We have two hour meetings once a month and trying to fit everything into those two hours is very hard.

*ANDREWS:* I guess one of the things that is very difficult to be able to obtain really is the dynamic that takes place when seven youth and eight adults or a composition of those sit down at the table to begin engaging in a discussion. What we are wondering is whether or not, could you tap into an example maybe that gives us an image of what those dynamics would look like when you sit down at the table as the chair, a youth chairing the commission with an adult and you are engaged in this discussion and the dynamics that unfold between the youth that are there and the adults that are there, and how you guys kind of evolve into identifying an issue or coming to some kind resolution on moving forward?

*RIVERA:* Most importantly, I think, is the respect. With the commission, one of our primary goals is to get the youth and adults to work together on an equal level. It is hard when I walk outside the commission, because in many places youth are not on the same level as the adults, and it is hard to see that happening after the commission. With that being said, that respect, we have a lot of lively debates and disagreements, but unlike elsewhere it is really that equality that the adults afford the youth that really set the tone. Everyone feels fine to talk and disagree. I, a few times, have been the lone dissenter and in that respect that does exist there. The ideas are for the youth, so this is the commission that makes adults aware that if you are going to do something for youth, you have to do it with the youth. They are the people that you want to satisfy, so listen to their opinions, and the people on the commission understand that and like I said, they regard youth as equals and that is a concept that sadly seems foreign in different areas of the community itself.

*BENHAM:* You know, helping to set that tone really starts early in how you recruit people and how you select. Now, it is not really up to us to appoint the youth commissioners, but we do get to recommend to the elected officials who we think is best suited for this kind of work. Because we are looking for adults that know how to listen #1, and #2, that have expertise that we can draw from in our projects that the students can learn from. So, it is finding the right people to begin with and secondly, preparing them for the setting so that they know how it works and we are actually pretty straightforward about telling the adults that we want your role to be support, not to leave the commission, but to support what emerges from the young people on the commission in the way of ideas and what their priorities are. We want to honor those and we

want to help support those in any way that we can. So, we make it pretty clear. Also, we talk about things like Robert's rules of order and how you dissent or agree and we try to do consensus as much as possible, but periodically, we do vote and the understanding is that once we vote, we are all in it together, whatever way the vote goes. So just I think having the ground rules and the expectations clearly outlined about how you effectively participate in a youth-adult partnership – it is pretty important stuff.

*RIVERA:* Joanne talked about getting off to a good start and from the youth perspective, I know when I first got involved with the commission, they made me feel important from the start. Soon after, I got a certificate from the Mayor, signed and everything and I know for me that gave me a sense of responsibility, a sense that I did want to achieve stuff and work for the goals of the commission. I got frequent phone calls, "let's go out for coffee," from other commissioners to talk about what is happening. So, I think they made me feel important from the start. From the start, I wanted to help out and see the commission improve and see what I could do.

*ANDREWS:* And the composition that you two were referring to, of the adults, are these adults that come primarily from the community or are they city officials?

*BENHAM:* No, they are not officials. They are folks from the community. They work in banks, real estate agencies, and universities. They come from all over the place.

*ANDREWS:* Yeah. And then the training that takes place for the youth and adults, is that outsourced to an organization that is responsible for providing the training as the new incoming members of the commission join? Or is it an irregular training that goes on?

*BENHAM:* No, we handle it mostly ourselves, but some of them already have some training through other agencies like, for instance, we have a program called Youth Leadership Spokane and those students have excellent exposure to community issues and leadership development, and we like to recruit youth from that program as much as possible, but also we look for youth that have other experiences, especially on the commission. Because we talk about policy and advocacy, those kinds of things are a little headier than maybe what the Teen Advisory Council is dealing with. They are organizing events and they are really hands-on; sometimes it is more challenging for young people to talk about planning for instance. So, you really need young people who understand the importance of that and feel comfortable with that. They are the folks that we need on the Youth Commission. So, we try to get everyone in the right place, or what they are really passionate about and what their skill development is at the time.

*RIVERA:* And just the interview process, what I found out and with talking to people throughout the community about what I do, there are a lot of adults that I would have never thought are excited about working with youth and figure out how they can help. So, you know, from first glance, I would think these people want to help but they do not have an idea about how to work with youth versus for youth and I think all cities have the people and resources available. Just looking around Spokane, there are just a lot of people who are almost like closeted about working with youth, but once they find out the different options and opportunities that they have to work side by side, they get excited, especially during the interview process. People were talking about it. They were excited. They were beaming and they were like, "I have so many

things that I want to do, I just have so many ideas, plans and resources that I can pump into the commission, I hope that I get chosen.” It has shown, too, now that we do have these commissioners. There is a lot to our pick in a leadership role with the youth to see what they can do.

*ANDREWS:* And I was wondering, the training through the youth leadership academy, is there some other effort that is also happening with the youth or youth and adults in terms that you guys talked about making sure that adults are respecting the youth and vice versa, particularly within these settings? Are there kinds of efforts that are also taking place in Spokane to show what that kind of respect level would look like as they engage in discussion as commissioners?

*BENHAM:* Well, as a matter of fact, I just spoke to someone this morning about that. We are trying to line up a training for the spring where we can have youth-adult partnership training, and there is a gentleman over on the other side of our state in Olympia who has put together an excellent training manual and we are going to bring him in to do a day-long training where we can identify the adult allies and the youth leaders and bring them together and do a little bit more formal instruction about how do we work together as two different cultures, as two different generations. Because we do recognize that we speak different languages sometimes and we just communicate in a different way. Our schedules are different. So, those are some of the challenges that we have to overcome if we want to be effective in working together.

*ANDREWS:* Yes, that’s great. Well, we will come back to you guys in a moment and I just want to thank you guys for giving some context to what is happening in Spokane and there are a couple of questions, too, that are coming already from those who are listening and we will get to that just in a moment, but I wanted to give Chris an opportunity to give some context to the efforts that are happening in Newport News, in ways that youth are having a seat at the table. Chris, if you could, even before you give some context, tell a little bit about your role within the city and how that fits into everything else to this discussion.

*TAN:* I am Chris Tan. I am the director for the Newport News Office on Children, Youth, and Families, formerly the Office on Youth Development. We are a department for the City of Newport News, Virginia. Our role is trying to expand the role of young people in policy and decision-making for the most part. Like Spokane, we have a rich history of youth and adult partnerships and youth and adult engagements. We have a Mayor’s Youth Commission that has been within our city for over 25 years. The Mayor’s Youth Commission is a group of 35 young people who advise the mayor on issues that they choose and they basically work throughout the year and then report to the mayor at the end of the school year. They also do interim reports to him. Actually, one is coming up in January. We also have, similar to Spokane, what we would call, the Newport News Commission on Youth, which is youth and adults working together. We have eight young people on that commission as well as eight adults from the community, citizens’ representatives and then eight adult representatives from youth-serving agencies in the city.

*ANDREWS:* Chris, what was that called again?

*TAN:* It is called the Newport News Commission on Youth and their focus is more on the development of a strategic plan for the city regarding young people. We developed a plan, I guess, five years ago and it is now being revised this year, and they go through the implementation of that plan and oversee the implementation of that plan. Then, recently, our office and our city in particular has focused on providing young people with different types of opportunities to participate in planning and decision-making. One of the things that we found, I think, is that young people are already tremendously busy with their school work, their career planning, in some sense, their college preparations, athletics and other clubs, and some of our youth opportunities really consumed a lot of their time, and so we try to provide other ways that they can be involved in planning and decision-making.

So, two years ago, our Mayor's Youth Commission recommended to City Council that young people be placed on a board that typically elected officials did not see as young people having a role with. So, they recommended that two young people be placed on the Human Rights Commission, the Newport News Arts Commission, and the Library Board of Trustees. The City Council adopted that policy and from that, we have expanded even further. We also have young people on a Framework for the Future Committee.

Our Department of Planning has a five year plan, it is actually a 30-year plan that they have to update every five years. It is a very large document and it takes quite a bit of time. In the past, they have had citizen groups from each of the planning districts talk about what they think about the document and they have all been adults. So, the last two times that they have used that planning document, they actually had a specific 15-member youth committee that also advised them on that plan for the entire city.

We also have a Chief of Police Youth Advisory Group that we just expanded, and a Public Works Citizen Advisory Group that has three young people on it, a Parks and Rec Youth Advisory Group that focuses on helping parks and recreation plan activities for teenagers, who are typically left out, at least in our parks and recreation facilities for things to do, and we also now have someone on the Newport News School Board who is actually the youth representative to the Newport News School Board.

*ANDREWS:* So, these youth advisory groups are solely youth that are on the youth advisory group or is the make up of youth and adults?

*TAN:* Some are solely youth, like the Chief of Police Advisory Group is solely young people. They have 15 young people, and I should say that the Chief of Police is in the group as well, but there are no other adults other than the Chief of Police, and we also have one staff person from our office who kind of serves as a way to help the Chief and young people structure meetings and give him an idea of what it is to work with youth and adults. A lot of adults from the adult world are not experienced in "you have to share the floor." It just can't be about you telling them what to do and that has worked out very well for us actually.

*ANDREWS:* In many of these, and I tried to keep up with them as you were mentioning the many different ways that youth are engaged on these nontypical boards, the library, the planning committee, the Chief of Police, public awareness, parks and recreation, and so each of them have young people that are participating. So, are you having challenges, kind of continuing to fill the slots of youth, or do you find that there is a willing and very engaged youth population, or even

more so now, because it fits better into their time constraints, that they were having prior to this decision to put them on these boards?

*TAN:* For the human rights commission, the arts commission and the Library Board of Trustees, which are really the three that we started out with, we have not had any challenges in getting young people that want to do that. I think that there are really only a couple of positions. It is exciting for them to think that they are on a board just like adults. We have not had any challenges there. I think the biggest challenge that we have had, in regards to those types of boards, is getting those boards to change their meeting times and that is a very difficult thing because most boards want to meet during the school day, because they do not want to take the time out of their work schedule and they have their busy work schedules as well.

That typically does not work for young people. They have to get permission to get off from their school principals, etc., and it just puts a burden on them academically. So, we have had some challenges there and I think that is one of the toughest things, to make adults realize that you have to meet the youth halfway and that this has to be just as much about them as it is about what they do as the so-called experts in the field. So, with the Commission on Youth and our Mayor's Youth Commission, both of those boards meet at night, so it gives young people plenty of time to participate in any other activities that they may have and give them an opportunity to participate fully on the boards.

*ANDREWS:* And because there are so many different opportunities here for youth to participate in different types of commissions, so there are the seven that I captured here and then there is the actual Youth Commission itself – that is a group of young people. How many youth are a part of that commission?

*TAN:* The Commission on Youth has eight and the Mayor's Youth Commission has 35.

*ANDREWS:* So, what efforts are done to really support the youth so that they can be actively engaged? And this is actually a question that came from a participant on the call. I guess the concern is the prep time to make sure that youth are engaged on all the different boards from a content standpoint and even from a confidence standpoint to be willing to articulate their viewpoints.

*TAN:* For the Mayor's Youth Commission in Newport News and the Commission on Youth, those boards are housed in our office. So, we have a great deal of involvement in those boards, in training for the young people and training for the adults, prior to them coming together and then training them together to try to give them a chance to get to know one another before they really start talking about policy and decision-making. The other boards are really outside of the scope of our office.

What we try to do is that we do some training with the adult board before the young person comes on board. We also train all the young people on the expectations that they have. A lot of times, a young person will sign up for something and not really know what it means. "What do I need to do? Can I talk at any time? Do I need to wait and not talk until I am asked to give my opinion?" You know, those types of things. So, we do a little bit of training around that, but also we try with those particular young people that are outside of the scope to really stay involved by keeping a consistent contact with them. While they are no longer

reporting to us about their role on the board, they are just being active on the board, we call them to ask how things are going, if they have had any problems with the board, how they are enjoying it, but also sending them reminders of when the board meetings are. We do that for their groups, because another thing that has happened to us, at least sometimes, young peoples' schedules are very busy. The meetings are maybe only once a quarter and then they cannot make that one meeting, well then the adults get very upset about this for some reason and they tend not to get so upset when adults miss meetings. So, it is really a negative thing. So, we try to make sure that they understand that young people are just as busy as you are.

*ANDREWS:* Right. I want to continue the conversation, but at this moment wanted to ask if the operator could come on the line for just a moment to provide listeners who are tuning in instructions on how to ask questions?

*OPERATOR:* If you would like to ask a question, pleased press \*1 on your telephone keypad.

*ANDREWS:* Great. So, we will continue to check questions and as they come in, I will make sure that I ask the panel. There are a couple of questions here that I am trying to infuse into our discussion here. There is a question, that is kind of the 800 pound gorilla in the room, is the issue of resources, monetary and non-monetary. We would be really interested if Chris, Joanne, and Matthew would talk a little bit about what resources you feel that you need and the programs need to consider or to have in place, to ensure that youth have a seat at the table.

*BENHAM:* Well, I guess that I will start by saying that you have to have staff people who can do just what Chris was talking about. Follow up with everyone personally to make sure that they understand what is going on between meetings and that things are going okay for them and there aren't some challenges that they are facing that are keeping them from being able to follow through on what they may have committed to. So, I am the e-mail queen. I am constantly sharing information that I receive about opportunities for their personal development, programming, and issues going on in the community. It is very labor-intensive, so if you do not have staff, I think you are going to have a lot of problems.

Also, the reason we have the foundation is that we do not have a big enough budget to resource everything that we want to do and getting the community involved and getting them excited about what we do is a lot of work in itself, but it has a payoff in that you have more advocates, once you tell your story about what these young people are interested in doing and they help tell the story, too, by the way. We do that together too. It is just a lot of planning, a lot of communicating, interconnecting. You need people, really. That is the biggest resource that you need, is the people.

Many times we get resources in kind that we need. For instance, in the Battle of the Bands, we get \$500,000 worth of equipment to use to do the Battle of the Bands. It is very nice equipment that most young people would not have access to otherwise. They also get a recording experience and these are things that are donated by the community. So, sometimes you don't need money, you just need to adequately express what it is you need to meet your goal.

*RIVERA:* I was just going to add, more than money, you know, there is the supportive knowledge that I have really found out from being here, is that a lot of people, even at City Hall where the Youth Department is, there are some people who seem to be really shut out and don't

know anything about it. They barely knew that it existed. So, a lot of it is just connecting with people. Getting the word out. Letting them know what you are doing and who you are. Joanne mentioned a half a million dollars for the Battle of the Bands fest and a lot of these donations, you know, temporary donations come from people who have worked with the commission or people that we have kept in touch with, so a lot of it is just a classic, “who you know versus what you know.” You know, keep those connections and create this web of people.

*ANDREWS:* Yeah. Chris, do you have some thoughts on resources that you needed or that are critical to ensuring that this process of engaging young people, or having them at the table, can be sustained or continued throughout your city?

*TAN:* Right. I think I piggyback on what Joanne and Matthew have said in the sense that it is about connections. It is about keeping young people involved. I think one of the best things about youth involvement, in some sense, and youth engagement, is that it really does not cost a lot. Putting two kids on a human rights commission did not cost the city a dime. It does not cost them any more than the two additional refreshments that they pay for at the quarterly meetings. One of the things that was so compelling about that was that it was young people that argued that those were the commissions that they wanted to see young people on, particularly the human rights commission. Because one of the things that their argument was in their presentation to their city council is that one of the greatest victims, often, of human rights violations is young people and not to have young people at the table advising that commission was important.

I think that, as far as resources are concerned, most of our resources are dedicated to keeping everybody in the loop; training resources obviously are important. I think non-monetary resources, you really need a champion among elected officials or senior city leaders that really supports the work that you are doing and who really can get the ears of people who make the decision. So, I do think that that is a very critical role. We have always had a very supportive mayor who has encouraged the young people to come up with proposals for him and the city council to look at. So, that has been a very fortunate thing for us as a city department.

*ANDREWS:* Okay.

*BENHAM:* I would agree with the champions issue. It is really very important and it is difficult in a political environment, because you have shifting elected officials all the time. So, the continuity is challenging, but I think the way you do that, you just create movements that are bigger than you and we have quarterly meetings with community leaders, which include elected officials, but also other leaders in other sectors of the community, whether it is business or higher ed or non-profit. We pull them all together on a quarterly basis and we use the America’s Promise Initiative as the focal point. So, we talk about the five promises, what is going on in our community and where are we struggling in delivering those promises. It is an easy way for them to understand youth development and that is why we use that as a tool for creating that synergy that we are looking for.

So, we do have good champions in our community. They are all over the place. They include multiple mayors in this area and county commissioners, but they also include the head of the library and the YMCA and you know the newspaper and everything else.

*ANDREWS:* Yeah, and a lot of these champions that have been mentioned are really those political champions that continue with that political will to continue to support it from the platform that each of them have. But another question that seems to be of interest to those who are listening on the call is really kind of a two-fold question. Where did the level of interest around creating the Youth Commission come from? Where was the motive for doing it, and kind of on the flip side of that, how do you continue that interest?

Not just the political will, but from the community, from the youth themselves, from the adults, and I think that Joanne was talking a little bit about those meetings that you were having with those community folks. It would be good if both cities could really talk about where the motive came from? Did it come from the grassroots, did it come from the mayor, did it come from some other entity, and what does it take to continue to maintain the youth interest and the adult interest around the work?

*BENHAM:* In our case, it was a grassroots movement, but with support from the mayor. He was key and a key councilmember who were very much in favor of creating some way to have youth have a voice within the structure of city government, but it started with forums around different problem areas, which I think is probably pretty typical. We focused on what is wrong first. So, at those forums, the topics were things like teenage pregnancy, school dropouts, youth unemployment, and street youth. Those kinds of things were getting the attention of the public, so they had a discussion about, “what is really going on here” and the conclusion was that we just don’t have enough connection with our young people. They do not have a voice to be able to tell us what we need to do to make this community a healthier place for them so that these things won’t happen.

So, that was the initial conversation. But I would say that over the years, as the commission has evolved, our tactic has not been to focus on what’s wrong, but to focus on what is right with the youth, what our aspirations for young people are and what are those key things that keep them healthy, keep them on the right track and keep them motivated? So, we have focused on youth development and less on all the problem areas, because that tends to immobilize people more than mobilize them. So, we find that talking about how we contribute to their success is more empowering to the community and they are willing to step forward to help.

*ANDREWS:* Okay.

*TAN:* I would definitely agree with Joanne there as well. Ours started out as a grassroots effort with support from various local agencies, agency directors, the mayor, and other key stakeholders and we really did the same thing. We had a youth and adult summit that tended to focus on, and as a city, we tended to focus on the negative things going on in our city: violence, rapes, teen pregnancy, and that type of thing and I think what resonates with people and I think a lot of the work that we started doing came from our knowledge of the Search Institute and the work that they had done, and America’s Promise as Joanne mentioned earlier. We kind of built on that as well.

I think that adults can relate to that as well. When you look at the research around the Search Institute and America’s Promise, it is almost intuitive that adults naturally think that, of course, we have to give them a healthy start. Of course, we have to give them an effective education. Of course, we have to give them opportunities to serve and those types of things, but when you actually start having the dialogue about how to do that, you know, that is really where

you engage people. Because most adults have a nostalgia for their childhood. In my day, neighbors really cared about their children. In my day, neighbors did these types of things. That also resonates with them.

So I think that is really how it was built. You have a committed group of adults who wanted to start to work with young people and how we have continued that is just by letting the young people do the work themselves. Young people are your best advocates. When you have young people going before city council or the mayor and talking about their passions and their ideas and their solutions to community problems, in my opinion, elected officials and those people are engaged. It is also very difficult to say no to young people who are that passionate. It is very difficult to say, "I don't think this is a good thing." So, there can be some active dialogue here. So, I think that is how we continued it. Once we got young people involved and once we got the Mayor's Youth Commission and the Commission on Youth, it just kind of snowballs in my opinion to add more opportunities, because people start to see the benefits of it.

*ANDREWS:* I wanted to do a quick check in with the operator to find out if there are any questions in queue.

*OPERATOR:* Yes, we have a question from Dallas Tringley with the City of Woodland Parks and Recreation.

*TRINGLEY:* Hi everybody. Thank you for speaking with us. Can you hear me?

*ANDREWS:* Yep, we can hear you.

*TRINGLEY:* Fantastic. My question was, I appreciated you talking about the motivations and all of that, I had a more specific question about what you did, initially, when you were starting these commissions, if you were a part of that, what you did to reach out to those students? What avenues did you use, like schools, groups, etc.? Basically, where did you go to get your workforce?

*ANDREWS:* Great.

*TAN:* For our group, with the Mayor's Youth Commission and the Commission on Youth is appointed by the city council. So, we really do not have a lot of say into that. Like Joanne, we can make recommendations, but they are appointed by council and by district. With the Mayor's Youth Commission, one of the things that we did was make it a competitive process. So it is not simply you want to join something, you can join. One thing I think that really helps to get young people attracted particularly to that, is that it actually has the mayor's name on it. It actually says the Mayor's Youth Commission. So, initially, I think a lot of young people go because it may look good on your college transcripts, so that is a tie in for them. We have never had a problem getting applications. Specifically, what we do is we do presentations to each of the high schools in our area. We have five public schools and two private high schools in our community and we do presentations to their guidance counselors and school resource staff and then hand out applications and then typically for 35 slots, we usually get about 250 applications a year. So, we have not really had any struggles there and I think the key is to inform that staff that are really connected to the young people at their schools about those opportunities.

**ANDREWS:** Okay. Matthew, could you talk a little bit from your lens about the challenges or maybe the successes that you have seen in reaching out to young people, the youth that are in Spokane, to get them interested in applying for a position on the Youth Commission or submitting their name to be considered or even the challenges of keeping them engaged or the successes that you have seen that have happened with the youth that are part of the commission, you know, keeping them engaged continually over the course of their time on the commission?

**RIVERA:** I find that most youth will give everything at least one chance. The biggest thing I think, intent is everything. I mean if you have a board that wants youth on there just because someone is asking and they want to look good, then you know youth can see right through that and they are not going to want to stay on there. They have better stuff to do with their time, people who actually do want them. Many times, the youth are presented with opportunities and they fail to seek them, I guess. Respect – I had mentioned that earlier. You know, that is something that I see throughout the community. When I go outside the commission, I do not see a lot of respect and it is hard. But when adults respect the youth that really does mean so much, because, sadly, it is not normal. Also, let the youth know that they have the power to change stuff, too. You know, when I first joined, that is what kept me here as the commissioner and also on the Teen Advisory Council. I realized that I really have the power to change stuff. If I have an idea, I know that if I say it, it will be honored. You know, people will look at it and we can evaluate it and, perhaps, even pursue it. It is that power, letting youth know that they count is I think the biggest thing when it comes to keeping their interest and keeping them involved.

**ANDREWS:** You talk about the word respect a lot. Could you boil that down a little to what that means. Like when you say, when you leave the commission and go into other settings, what does the lack of respect look like from a youth perspective in these settings?

**RIVERA:** I think a lot of people can understand when I say how adults often talk to you. “Where are you going? What are you doing?” That is not how you would talk to an equal. You know, “where are you headed?” A lot of it is tonality. A lot of it is word choice, too, you know. A lot of adults, I mean at my school they see someone in the halls and they give them glares, like you don’t belong here. It is just regarding youth as equals. You can even be an authoritative figure, but you have to act as if youth are human sometimes. It seems that a lot of adults forget that or just really don’t care. Just listening to them and hearing their opinions, and not only that, but people sometimes find that, well I sat there, I listened, and I sounded interested or whatnot, but they need to follow up. Youth love it when you sound interested in stuff, but if you do not follow up, if you don’t go through the initiative to do something more, then you are just another person. Youth are busy people, as was said earlier, so we have to spend our time with people who respect our time.

**ANDREWS:** Joanne, there is another question that came in specifically for you. Can you speak further on the subject of the Youth Award Ceremony that you mentioned earlier? Is the program well received? How are the honoraries selected?

**BENHAM:** Yes. Well, it is a huge project for us, but it is a labor of love. The awards have different categories, like citizenship, creativity, personal achievement and we have selected the

categories based on what we thought were characteristics that we wanted to honor in young people, because we are making them the role models for other youth. We are holding them up as examples to the community. So, we wanted those to be strengths of character. We also have divisions, because we do not want kindergarteners competing against seniors in high school. So, we have three divisions; elementary, middle school, and high school. The process is that we put out a nomination form, a brochure, and our students right now are actually making presentations to school staff about the awards process, how to nominate, because we think that the schools are a great resource for identifying who those young people are, but also neighbors and friends of kids can nominate them. Anyone can make a nomination. You do not have to be an educator or anything like that.

We also use the mass media. We have two media partners. One is a TV station, the ABC affiliate, and also our local newspaper, so they will print our nomination form. We also have it online on our web site and then our TV partner, hopefully, will do a PSA come January. Our deadline is January 31<sup>st</sup>, and then it takes a couple of weeks. We have panels of community judges for each age group. So, those judges will receive the award nomination letters. They will get to analyze them. We help them with a ratings sheet and then they meet. So, we have three mornings where we bring in these panels and they discuss their ratings. It is kind of a negotiated thing. We don't strictly go by the numbers and what is on paper, but there is conversation about who the top recipients are.

We get over 2,000 students nominated, so every one of them gets an invitation to the awards ceremony, which we do at the end of March. Every one of them will get a certificate that is signed by the mayor, the county commissioner chair, and our Youth Commission Chair, Matthew this year, and so they all get the invitation and when they step in the doors, the first thing we do as Youth Commissioners is that we greet them, congratulate them and we hand them a ribbon that says that, "I am a Chase Youth Award Nominee." So, we can identify, who is the audience are our nominees.

*RIVERA:* I also want to point out real quick the criteria. The Chase Youth Award is also about saying thank you for the small things, too. We have had nominations from 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers who have said that this student comes in every day with a smile on and lights up the class and behaves. You know, just really provides a great dynamic to the classroom. Stuff like that, normally is not really recognized. You know, the youth do it, but no one is ever going up to them and saying thank you. That is what the Chase Youth Award is all about. You know, everyone who is nominated gets to go to this event. It is many people dressed up in suits. I remember that I won it back in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and I remember just the opportunity to go to this back then and it was held at the Opera House. You know, a black tie event and stuff and I was just thrilled. I felt so important and realized that these small things do count. So, criteria is a big thing. It is not just the kids that overcame huge obstacles or accomplished huge feats. It is also the kids who have done those small things that make big differences.

*ANDREWS:* We are at the talk end of our call here. I just wanted to do a quick final check in with Kira, the operator, to see if there are any other questions in the queue?

*OPERATOR:* I actually have two more questions in the queue.

*ANDREWS:* Oh, man. Well, why don't we allow them to ask the questions and we will see whether or not there is a potential quick response.

*OPERATOR:* Okay, the first question is from April Chambers, New York City Department of Youth and Community.

*CHAMBERS:* Good afternoon. We wanted to learn more about the non-profit arm of the program in Spokane, Washington. How did that program get started and what kind of people do you have supporting the foundation?

*ANDREWS:* Okay, great. So, the non-profit arm in Spokane, how did it get started and the kind of support that you have? Okay. Great, and can we get the final question please?

*OPERATOR:* This last question is from Shannetta Mark, from the Forum of Youth Investment.

*ANDREWS:* Great. Hi, Shanetta.

*MARK:* Hi, Leon. How are you?

*ANDREWS:* Great.

*MARK:* So, my question is what kind of policy changes are you seeing in Spokane and with the folks in Newport News? What kind of opinions are you seeing in policy as a result of young people being at the table?

*ANDREWS:* Ah, great. So, the question is with their involvement in policy and with the youth involvement, are we seeing any policy changes that would not happen if the young people were not there? So, what I would like, you guys, since we are at the end, in your final thoughts, just some parting thoughts, could you guys take these two questions possibly and give a departing thought as a way for us to wrap up. Why don't we start with Chris? Could you just give some final thoughts to the folks here on the call and essentially try to wrap in these two questions, if you could?

*TAN:* For some final thoughts, I would just say that I think that when you engage young people and you can hear this in Matthew's voice as well, you get that excitement that young people naturally have. They bring energy to the table that many adults may not have and maybe cannot bring to the table and I just think that as you begin to engage them in these types of activities, I think what you begin to see is that you have a better decision and a better planning process. And to answer your question about what types of changes have we seen in policy now that youth has been more involved in policy, I know that the Library Board of Trustees, now that they have these two young people on there and they are hearing their opinions, they are beginning to look at the young people in their staff and the young people that could be in their staff as resources. I know that they have already put policies in place to change the age that they can hire certain individuals, or they have looked at that.

I think that, in addition, one of the policy changes, the major policy changes, is that we are beginning to see young people on more boards and commissions and also the

Newport News School Board now has one youth representative. I am sure that there are many decisions that are made that may be different from before, particularly discussions on things like school uniforms, that last year was a big bone of contention in our city and always has been, but at least having the discussion with a young person and having them talk about what they feel school uniforms are and what the importance of it is or the lack of importance of it. So, I think that it definitely adds the policy and decision-making.

*ANDREWS:* Great. Thanks, Chris for participating in the call and giving context to all the great things that are happening in Newport News. Matthew, did you want to give some parting thoughts to folks?

*RIVERA:* I guess so. You know, remember to make people aware of youth. That is the biggest thing. Make them aware that youth are here. They do affect the adults too, just as much as the adults affect youth and just let them know that the youth need a voice and let the youth know that they have a voice. That is it right there. That is the basis of any change.

*ANDREWS:* Thank you, Matthew for joining and bringing your enthusiasm and your perspective on how the youth in Spokane are engaged in the city and also just for your general insight into the call. Joanne, can you maybe do a wrap up, bringing in the discussion about the non-profit arm?

*BENHAM:* Actually, the non-profit thing is not difficult. You have to just file IRS paperwork to begin with, but we were lucky enough to have a lawyer who donated his time to help us set it up and you need a board of directors, so you need folks in the community that you can identify as advocates for youth, but don't mind doing fundraising type of work. They are really sales people. You are sales people. That is the basis of it. We have all kinds of great people from the private sector doing that. As far as policy change, we actually have some youth policy embedded in our comprehensive plan, our growth management strategy that speaks to the importance of youth voice and civic engagement. We talk about the 40 developmental assets as our philosophy for youth development. So, that is actually embedded in city policy.

I see changes in customer service areas, where youth are seen as customers, where they were not before. We also have youth members on the school board now. That is fairly new in the last few years, but that has actually inspired a better relationship between the city and the school district. We are separate. The city does not run our school district and it used to be that we just kind of left each other alone, but I think that we are starting to see each other as having common interests more and, in fact, tomorrow, there is a cabinet meeting with the superintendent of schools and I always get invited to those particular meetings, but I am not a cabinet member. They see the work of the Youth Commission as important to their conversations, so that is a change and also, I think the last change that I would point to is youth and the economy. Our city is starting to recognize that youth really help drive the economy, so there is a lot more interest in what youth think. What are they buying? How are they involved? How is this community youth-friendly? It is an economic driver.

*ANDREWS:* Thank you, Joanne, again for your participation and the perspective on all the great things that are happening in Spokane as well. And also for our callers, for those that listened in, we would just like to thank you for your participation and want to just highlight that

if you are interested in more information on ways that cities are promoting youth participation and youth leadership, please visit the Institute's web site, [www.nlc.org/iyef](http://www.nlc.org/iyef) and there is a publication that we have out, that has been out for a while called "Promoting Youth Participation." It highlights different ways that cities are engaged and also highlights various city examples of what is happening. Also, for further information, you can contact Rebecca Makar, who is the program associate for youth development, at [makar@nlc.org](mailto:makar@nlc.org). Again, thanks to Joanne, Matthew, Chris and to our operator, Kira, for hosting this for us and we also wish everyone a Happy Holidays.