

## Health Resources in Action

### Expanding the Group *Adapted from Youth on Board*

What does youth involvement mean to your organization or group? For some organizations, youth involvement will mean having a few young board members, while for others it may take the form of a youth advisory group or hiring youth staff. Some ways to involve young people are as:

- board members,
- staff members,
- youth advisory group members,
- special assistants for projects or presentations,
- volunteers, or
- interns.

All of the approaches to youth involvement, though they can be defined in many different ways, fall into two general categories. The first is to involve young people directly in an existing adult body. For example, add several youth positions to an existing board, taskforce, policy committee, church council, city commission, foundation board, or tribal council. Your biggest decision with this route is to decide if the positions will be voting, nonvoting, or observing. The second strategy is to set up an adjunct body consisting only of young people. With this strategy, you need to pay close attention to how this group gives input to your primary governing body and what staff support is available to keep the group functioning well.

Youth on Board has seen how scores of organizations have involved young people. Of all approaches, we've found that it's best if organizations use both strategies (adding young people to an adult structure and setting up an adjunct body for youth only) and have them work together. However, it's important to remember that there is no one right approach. What works for one group or organization may not work for another. Your focus should be on determining where your needs and interests intersect with a particular model. If you're trying to make a decision about whether to add young people to a current governing body or develop a new adjunct body, consider a few key concerns:

#### **When adding youth to adult structures:**

Young people may feel intimidated in a group of predominantly adult members and therefore may not participate as freely as they should. Know that because youth representation usually only counts for a minority of total board membership, only a few young voices will be heard. This can lead to feelings of tokenism among young members. Though there are drawbacks to this approach, know that including young people in decisions made by your group compels adult members to buy into the theory that the opinions of young people are vital to the function of your organization.

## Health Resources in Action

### **When creating an adjunct body just for young people:**

This body must have a defined role that is fully acknowledged by the governing body, or it can easily fall apart or become disillusioned with the organization. In this case, the entire board doesn't receive the full benefit that participation by young people brings. However, this approach works as a less intimidating, less formal place for young people to openly discuss issues and practice decision-making and meeting participation skills. This type of structure allows input from a large number of young people.

What follows is a brief description of the most common structural options used by various organizations, followed by real-life examples. (All 501(c) (3) organizations have a board of directors as their primary governing body; these options can be considered decision-making bodies, but the responsibilities of each are different. Additionally, these options can include youth and adults, or just youth.

### **Advisory group**

An advisory group offers regular feedback and advice to an organization, governing body, or individual. The group meets regularly and gives input on particular issues as requested by the governing body. The group can also take on other projects, such as planning special events. In most cases, the advisory group has no governing authority or programmatic function. It is critical to define the advisory group's role and function before recruiting young people to be members. It is a mistake to setup up an advisory group that is underused or not given sufficient authority to make recommendations.

**Example:** Generations, Inc., a Boston-based nonprofit organization that brings youth and elders together, has a 10-member kids board that advises the board of directors on all program areas. The kids board also produces a newsletter about the different neighborhood projects in progress.

### **Policy committee**

Policy committees, unlike many advisory groups, have an institutionalized role in the organization, according to the organization's bylaws. They serve in a significant advisory capacity in all areas, from programs and hiring to budget and organizational issues. However, they do not necessarily have representation on the board. It is possible that there would be a representative from a policy committee sitting on the board generally or when the policy committee is advising the board in a specific area.

**Example:** YouthBuild USA, based in Somerville, Mass., and its affiliates each have policy committees that meet on a regular basis in order for corps members and alumni to give input and feedback. They discuss many of the same issues that the board is wrestling with, and their input is vital at the board level when decisions are being made. In certain areas, including hiring and firing, this committee serves as the decision-making body.

### **Program committee**

Similar to an advisory group, a program committee offers support and feedback to the governing board, particularly around specific projects. It doesn't have any governing authority, although its input is important to a governing body. The main difference is the

## **Health Resources in Action**

length and scope of responsibilities: program committees are usually convened around a specific program or project, whereas advisory groups can advise on all aspects of an organization's operations.

**Example:** The organization Knoxville's (Tenn.) Promise- Alliance for Youth formed a youth council to help with the planning of its Regional Youth Summit. The youth council was responsible for setting goals for the youth and adult tracks at the summit, planning a service project for the event, and facilitating roundtable discussions on the day of the event.

### **Grant-making committee**

This committee consists of a group of people who make decisions on how to allocate funds to community projects. Among the duties performed by grant-making committees are to set funding guidelines, review grants, make site visits, and raise funds.

**Example:** The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's Youth Development Division created a board that brings together teens from the greater Kansas City area to exchange ideas about the needs of young people. The Youth Advisory Board sets policy and guides the distribution of special grants from the Kauffman Foundation. It creates requests for proposals, meets to review applicants, conducts site visits, and gives grants of up to \$5,000 for youth-led projects for youth service and youth leadership in the urban core of Kansas City.

### **Commission**

Commissions are fully autonomous entities. Rather than acting as an adjunct to an organization or city office, they are usually set up to advance policies and recommendations for a community or organization.

**Example:** San Francisco has a number of commissions that counsel the city in areas ranging from human services to city planning. Young people who provide input on policy advise many of these groups. In particular, the San Francisco Youth Commission assists other city departments and commissions to include youth voices and perspectives.

### **Task force**

A task force is usually a short-term entity that is created for a specific purpose.

**Example:** The Ford Foundation, based in New York City, established the Youth Commission on Urban Poverty several summers ago to bring together six young people from around the country to spend the summer studying urban poverty and producing a report for the Foundation's board. Although they called it a commission, we would classify it as a task force because it had a short life and a specific focus.

Expanding the Group. (2000). In *Youth on Board: Why and How to Involve Young People in Organizational Decision Making*. Somerville, MA: BoardSource (formerly the National Center for Nonprofit Boards)