HOW TO HOST AN AUTHENTIC YOUTH LISTENING SESSION

Toolkit for the Supporting Vulnerable Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care Project

A Listening Session is a facilitated discussion with a particular group of people, intending to empower the members of the Listening Session to share their experiences to help shape research, policy, or procedure. This tool kit aims to provide resources and guidance for both service providers who wish to hold a Listening Session and for the youth and young adults (YYAs) who will be participating in the Listening Session. Listening Sessions can be hosted to help Service Providers make decisions that are informed by YYAs and allow YYAs the space to engage in effective change within their communities.

Level Setting/ Creating Spaces

As a young person ages, their ability to participate in federally funded spaces depends on the federal funding source. Not all federal funding sources cover minors or young adults over the age of 24, and this information needs to be outlined as a requirement for YYAs to engage as a critical pillar within a program's success. A complete understanding of what a YYAs may be participating in and what is expected of them is essential. This will allow all participants to engage in the Listening Session with confidence and feel more inclined to apply to different opportunities that may arise over time. Programs should also clearly outline what identities and backgrounds are essential for specific spaces to ensure YYAs fully understand the opportunities for which they are eligible.

Setting expectations for YYAs, staff, and others involved in the agency who may work alongside staff (such as volunteers) can also help decrease any negative interactions. Staff hosting the Listening Session and YYAs who will be taking part in the session should all have dedicated time during the session to identify and create a Shared Community Agreement that dictates how they contribute to and interact with others in the Listening Session. There should also be clear, defined processes for how YYAs can address grievances with each other and with staff involved in the Listening Session.

Sample Shared Community Agreements

- **Take space, make space** - Some of us are a lot more vocal than others and sometimes that leaves our more introverted peers feeling like they do not have the space to share or contribute. Try to be self-aware and recognize when you are taking space and be sure you are creating as much space for others to share as you are taking.
- **Work the issue, do not get personal** - Sometimes the topics discussed in Listening Sessions can come with high emotions and passionate responses. Assume everyone is coming to the space with positive intent until proven otherwise.
- **Take care of yourself** - It is difficult to authentically contribute to processes when we are neglecting our needs. Take breaks and step away as needed.

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- **Learnings leave the room, stories stay** - When sharing your experience in a Listening Session the personal stories and experiences of your peers should remain private. People should feel safe to share within these spaces. However, participants are encouraged to share the themes and facts they learned in this process.
- **Foster a space for true authenticity** - Hosting an authentic YYA Listening Session calls for the staff hosting them to create a space that meets YYAs where they are in that moment. While staff should provide clear communication of processes and expectations, this should never be at the expense of the participants' natural comfort level. They should be encouraged and affirmed to bring their full selves 'as is' to the conversation.

Planning Your Listening Session

Hosting a Listening Session does not just happen overnight. There is some preparation involved. Before deciding to host a Listening Session gather your team and identify the goal(s) of your session. After deciding on 1-2 goals, try to identify 3-5 objectives per goal.

> **Examples of Goals for a Youth Listening Session**
> - Improving existing forms (intake forms, consent forms, assessment forms, etc.)
> - Getting feedback on how to better improve specific services (access to mental health, access to STI testing, etc.)
> - Reformatting program services to achieve better/more long-lasting outcomes
> - Collaborating with YYAs to identify specific service gaps in your area

After establishing your goals and objectives identify who will be facilitating the Listening Session. When identifying a Facilitator for your session try to choose someone who has facilitation experience or is someone that YYAs will be comfortable with. You should also identify a Notetaker. A Notetaker can be a member of staff or a young person participating in the session. Notetakers should gather as much information as possible to be able to identify themes after the session. Notes should be shared with participants as soon as possible after the session (while respecting confidentiality), so YYAs can have the opportunity to correct feedback that was misquoted or misrepresented. Additionally, consider sharing notes in visual formats such as word clouds.

Finally, before deciding to host a Listening Session, programs are encouraged to consider what products you will need to create for the session to be successful.

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Products to Consider for a Youth Listening Session
- A Facilitator Guide - While facilitators should be trained and will also have an agenda to help them navigate the Session, some facilitators find having a detailed guide to be helpful.
- Consent/Assent Forms - Collect Consent forms from the caregivers/guardians of minors and Assent forms from youth and young adults before participation. These forms should be as informative as possible.
- Youth Feedback Form - Allow participants to provide anonymous feedback about the session and review the feedback as soon as possible after the session. Use that feedback to adjust your process for future sessions.
- Agenda - This should outline a clear schedule of events and topics for participants and facilitators.
- Visual Supports (such as PowerPoints) - Some people need visual supports to process discussion questions and/or themes.

6 Key Components: Barriers and Tips

Let us examine the key components of hosting an Authentic Youth Listening Session and common barriers that often prevent service providers from fully engaging in Authentic Youth Listening Sessions. In addition to naming the barriers to achieving the key components we also present tips for ways to overcome those barriers in ways that authentically engage YYAs.

Addressing barriers that may arise in a Listening Session and how to course correct/acknowledge them:

1. Compensation

Barrier:
Organizations may struggle to provide compensation due to limited funding or adultist attitudes that frame young people's engagement as a learning, volunteer, or internship opportunity rather than a form of emotional and intellectual labor. In addition to funding barriers for organizations, some young people may also be receiving state benefits that limit the types of compensation they can receive without negatively impacting their benefits.

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Tip for Authentic Youth Engagement:
Young people should be compensated equitably for their time involved in Listening Sessions in ways that meet their needs. Young people may be taking time out of their busy days or time off work to attend a Listening Session. As a result, young people involved in Listening Sessions should be provided with monetary payment. While providing food, restaurant vouchers, and gifts are always appreciated, they are **not** a form of adequate or equitable payment. These do not empower youth to make financial decisions. For accessibility purposes, provide multiple methods of payment. For example, service providers could let YYAs choose to be compensated through money-sharing apps (e.g., PayPal, CashApp, Venmo, etc.), providing cash payments, or gift cards. Some forms of payment, such as gift cards, may be preferred by young people. Gift Cards should ideally be given as a prepaid credit card (such as VISA or Greendot) so young people can access what they need, as not all YYAs have access to certain stores.

2. Accessibility

Barrier:
Hosting a Listening Session is not as simple as setting up a Zoom meeting or an office space. Young people may struggle to attend Listening Sessions due to the inaccessibility of the physical location or, if virtual, lack of access to the internet. There are a lot of YYA voices that are regularly left out of important discussions because they live in transportation or internet deserts. They may also struggle to be engaged depending on the time of day of the event due to balancing work and personal time demands such as needing time off work, childcare needs, or language and communication barriers.

Tip for Authentic Youth Engagement:
To improve access to Listening Sessions, offer multiple opportunities for engagement. This can look like hosting in-person and virtual Listening Sessions or a hybrid Listening Session. When hosting a hybrid Listening Session, it is important to remind participants to use the provided microphone so individuals attending virtually can hear those attending in person. Some YYAs are virtual learners and need to process information through hands-on activities. One way to improve accessibility for these YYAs would be to include hands-on activities that are tied to a question prompt or reflection that allows participants to process their thoughts and express them in an artistic way before sharing them with the group. Some examples of artistic expressive activities are sand trays, painting, drawing, or writing. To ensure young people who are attending virtually are not spoken over, let young people know they can use the hand raise feature on platforms like Zoom or have them indicate when they want to talk in the chat. It is also important to provide avenues for YYAs who are not able to participate (due to work or school conflicts, transportation, or verbal communication barriers) an

avenue for sharing their feedback. YYAs who are unable to attend the Listening Session can still participate through virtual avenues, such as Google Forms that ask some of the same questions featured in the Listening Session. Consider partnering with local organizations to provide bus passes or hotspots for YYAs facing transportation or internet access barriers.

3. Power Dynamics

Barrier:
Listening Sessions are a space where young people are asked to be vulnerable and share individual experiences with people they often do not know or may not trust. When the people facilitating the Listening Session do not share many of the same identities as participants, young people may feel distrustful or unsure if they will be understood or taken seriously. Young people participating in Listening Sessions may have extensive histories of exploitative/negative experiences with older adults in various systems. The experiences of YYAs in various systems like child welfare, criminal justice and mental health often involve older adults either collecting data or extracting information from them. When data is collected, it means that information is being gathered from YYAs, possibly without their full understanding or consent. This data might be used in ways that negatively affect the lives of YYAs. On the other hand, data extracting refers to retrieving specific information or details from the collected data. In these situations, YYAs may feel hesitant to share openly due to trust, fearing potential consequences like being reported or losing access to necessary services.

Tip for Authentic Youth Engagement:
To mitigate these harmful power dynamics, when possible, have facilitators also be people with lived experience. Ensure that information collected will be de-identified if shared publicly unless a young person explicitly consents to sharing personal quotes. Additionally, be upfront and transparent about how information will be collected and shared and allow YYAs the agency to disengage from sharing information they may not be comfortable with. Begin by setting ground rules within the space surrounding confidentiality. Let young people know that disclosures of lived experience with violence, substance abuse, or trafficking will not trigger non-consensual intervention from outside systems. If facilitators are mandated reporters, share that information early and be transparent about the process of mandated reporting. Transparency and clear expectations allow YYAs who have rarely experienced agency within systems to decide when and how to engage within the Listening Session.

4. Adultism

Barrier:

Adultism manifests when older adults believe they know more or better than YYAs. Within a Listening Session, some youth may feel unsure if they can speak freely due to adultism. As they step into a professional setting with individuals who may currently be offering certain supportive services, this could lead youth to speak in a filtered manner. The need to filter or moderate your language or behaviors due to a real or perceived power imbalance is called code-switching. Additionally, when facilitators react to the stories being shared by YYAs with adultist responses or react in ways that make YYAs feel silenced or unimportant, it drastically reduces the authenticity of the Listening Session.

Common phrases of adultism to avoid include (but are not limited to):

- "You're still a little wet behind the ears."
- "Well, when I was your age…"
- "You'll understand once you've lived a little more."
- "You're so smart to only be ___ years old!"

Some examples of adultism include (but are not limited to):

- Assuming young people only have expertise about issues concerning YYAs
- Using heavily jargoned language without providing explanations of acronyms or specialized terms
- Relying on YYAs for small/menial tasks instead of partnering with them on meaningful work
- Using the experiences of YYA to write grants/create products without collaborating with YYAs on how their experiences and stories are being used
- Requiring specific "professional" dress codes without consideration that some YYA may not be able to afford or feel like their authentic selves in "business casual/professional" attire
- Dismissing a young person's expertise based on their vocabulary, accents, or vernacular

Tip for Authentic Youth Engagement:

A YYA should not need to code-switch or change who they are. They are equals and their expertise is invaluable in this field, they deserve equitable spaces. Having a set understanding of ground rules and establishing confidentiality within these spaces is crucial. Additionally, facilitators and staff collaborators should be trained in Adultism and Positive Youth Development to ensure healthy interactions. Recognize YYAs for their contribution to the work and give them credit for the expertise they contribute. Remind facilitators that they are there to participate in and guide the conversation without passing judgment on any participants.

5. Tokenization

Barrier:

Listening Sessions can be spaces for a diverse group of participants to come together and share thoughts and ideas around shared experiences, such as homelessness or foster care.
However, it is important to remember that Listening Session participants are only speaking to their experiences, not the experiences of everyone who shares their same or similar identities.

Sometimes YYAs are given opportunities because of a token aspect of their identity. This is not acceptable, nor should it be something YYAs should expect. If an opportunity is not offered in good faith, and the YYA is being used for personal gain, in the long term, those YYAs will face significant challenges accessing support. Being used in any situation can cause a person to have self-doubt, even if they have accomplished so much. Imposter syndrome is high for YYAs.

Tip for Authentic Youth Engagement:

If you notice all participants share the same racial, gender, sexual, ethnic, or disability identities, ask who is being left out and why, then course correct by doing targeted outreach to populations that may be left out of your Listening Sessions.

As providers have access to a variety of opportunities, YYAs should not have to struggle to attain them or feel like they need to change who they are to gain access. It should not be a game or battle amongst YYAs for who is a better fit if a provider offers regular and varied opportunities and resources. Opportunities should be equitably shared as everyone has unique needs and capabilities. If you notice the same YYAs getting chosen to participate repeatedly, look at your processes and the opportunities you are providing and consider how you might expand the opportunities available to a broader network of YYAs.

Having YYAs working alongside you and authentically collaborating with them can promote confidence. Creating a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) generates a space to share what is happening and address issues about which you may not know. A YAB is a board or council of YYAs from your community, often with lived expertise, which helps programs assess services, policies, and documents while identifying solutions for barriers the program and YYAs are facing. One effective strategy for striving for authentic collaboration is blending your Board of Directors and YAB meetings quarterly so the two groups can compare issues and strengths they see and identify similarities.

6. Length of Engagement

Barrier:
Young people who have been system-involved or have experienced homelessness are often used to relationships being temporary, non-sustained, and transactional. These kinds of transactional relationships can reproduce harm and distrust in systems. Listening Sessions are, by nature, often short-term engagements and can contribute to the feelings of lacking long-term, meaningful relationships and engagements.

Tip for authentic youth collaboration:
To mitigate this kind of harm in a Listening Session environment, provide opportunities for continued engagement or follow-up. Let young people know what will be done with their responses and provide them with email follow-up of any research or data published based on their responses. Additionally, if your organization is hiring, let young people know there are other ways they can remain engaged in the work, such as applying for jobs at your organization or working as paid consultants on other projects.

Sample Questions for Your Next Authentic Listening Session

The list of questions listed below is meant to serve as a guide to Programs that are planning a Listening Session. Programs are encouraged to use questions from this list or create their own questions that best meet their needs. Please be realistic about the time you have allotted for your Listening Session and how many questions you can include. This may mean finding a balance between the number of questions you want to ask, allowing sufficient time for answers, and probing deeper into the answers shared. Additionally, consider getting youth input in the questions you choose/develop to ensure affirming language is being used and the questions you are asking are truly aimed at meeting the goals and objectives you identified. Finally, plan for the accessibility needs of the participants, such as learning differences, visual or hearing impairments, and speech difficulties, and how to accommodate those needs.

- What is one thing you (and/or your peers) need to be successful?
- What do you think is the most important service being offered in our community?
- What gaps do you see in the services being provided in the community?
- Tell me about accessing services for mental health and physical health. Do you and your peers have the tools you need to navigate the Healthcare system?
- What barriers do you face when it comes to accessing health services?

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- Who do you reach out to when you do not know how to access a specific system or certain services?
- What is one program/service that could help improve your access to health services?
- What type of programs/services have you accessed in the community (either through our program or another)? Why did you choose the service providers you chose?
- What do you think the purpose of our program is?
- What is one thing you wish service providers in our community knew/understood? How would services be improved if more people knew/understood that thing?
- Have the services you have received helped you work toward any of your goals? Have the services helped you be healthier? What outcomes have the services you have received helped you achieve?
- Do you think you have been an active partner in the services you have received? How would these services change if you were an active partner?
- What are examples of services/partnerships you have seen that have empowered YYAs?
- Are there youth voices that you see being left out of important conversations? How do we better engage them?