

## INTRODUCTION

Policy and advocacy can be defined as the active involvement in strategies and activities that influence decision makers and drive public policy, laws and systems. Policy and advocacy is traditionally viewed as being conducted through litigation, lobbying and public education but may also include capacity building, leadership development, forming networks and relationship building (NAO, 2016). Adults are frequently seen as the driving force behind policy and advocacy work, whereas young people are often the target population for the creation and implementation of public health policies and programs. These policy and advocacy efforts aim to create behavior changes to reduce youth-related behavioral health problems, such as tobacco and/or substance misuse, obesity or mental health issues. While some policies have been proven to be effective in addressing these behavioral health issues, their effectiveness may be restricted by having limited youth voice. Involving youth in decision-making processes reaches beyond token participation and superficial acceptance of their contribution.

The goal of youth-led programs (YLP) in Ohio is to empower young people to create community change. Youth-led programming supports the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes in participating youth while engaging in the planning process of creating community change. As part of this planning process, young people select and implement evidence-based prevention strategies. Environmental strategies are one strategy, and policy and advocacy (the focus of this paper) is one activity within this strategy. Developing sociopolitical awareness in youth is a key component of YLP that makes the connection between empowerment and effecting longstanding change.

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**For more information on youth-led programs, please see the following white papers:**

**Community-Based Process:** This paper explains the foundational role of community-based processes in prevention and youth-led programs.

**Media Campaigns:** Media campaigns are one strategy young people may choose to implement as a result of their strategic planning process. This paper provides an overview of types of media campaigns and messages.

**Prevention Education:** This paper provides an expanded definition of prevention education and explains how this strategy may be utilized by youth-led programs.

**Social Norms:** Social norms influence behavioral health. This paper explains how social norm campaigns can be developed and implemented by youth-led programs to create community change.

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Preparing young people to authentically and purposefully engage in public policy takes education, involvement in networking and community engagement opportunities, data review, identification of a problem of practice and contributing factors, determination of which policies to address, and advocacy practices.

An environmental strategy “seeks to establish or change standards or policies to reduce the incidence and prevalence of behavioral health problems in a population” (OhioMHAS, 2016, p.3). On a micro-level, this change can occur anywhere from the school settings where youth attend or communities they directly live. On a macro level, involvement can be in county-wide and state level initiatives. On both levels, activities such as building youth/adult relationships, forming networks, leadership development, youth serving on boards and publicly speaking on topics relevant to them are integral in policy and advocacy involvement.

Many youth-led programs are already engaging in actions that may lead to effective policy. As stated above, adults are frequently seen as the driving force of policy, but young people can and should play an important role in policy development. In middle and high school, many young people begin to examine and question the policies and practices around them, but may lack the permission or knowledge to effectively change those policies.

The table below is one example of how social change through public policy is addressed on a continuum and recognizes policy as part of a comprehensive approach. Additionally, it shows successful policy requires people operating at different levels. Each step in making social change is important and creates avenues where young people can use their strengths to impact a problem of focus, or issue, they are passionate about.

**How Change Happens: A Social Change Continuum**

Service	Activism	Information Dissemination/Engagement	Advocacy	Public Policy
Addresses an immediate need in the community	Emphasizes urgency and draws attention to an issue in the community	Increases the knowledge of citizens by informing them about an issue with the goal of influencing behaviors	Gives voice to the voiceless by articulating community will to promote policy change	Is community will in action and lays the foundation for change
INFORMS Activism	INSPIRES Information Dissemination	STRENGTHENS Advocacy	DRIVES Public Policy	

*Developed by Youth at The Center, Cincinnati, OH*

When youth are included in decision-making and have their voices heard on ways to address community issues, they become engaged as change agents. This type of authentic youth engagement is less about token inclusivity of youth in adult affairs, but emphasizes “meaning, control and connectedness to thrive in an adult-youth partnership” (PeerNetBC, 2004).

Organization, community and youth benefits to be considered from policy and advocacy participation of young people include:

- Engaging youth encourages young people to become active community members who will be more likely to vote and be engaged in the democratic process
- Giving young people the opportunity to develop key leadership skills and practical experience leads to more effective decision-making in the present and future
- Granting youth control over decisions affecting their lives builds capacity in young people to take ownership of their lives and communities (PeerNetBC, 2004).

## THE ADULT ALLY ROLE

The Youth Empowerment Conceptual Framework (YECF; Holden et al., 2004) is one framework that informs YLP in Ohio. This framework is a valuable tool for youth-led programs and indicates that the adults facilitating these programs should identify individual and group outcomes that may be anticipated by participating in the YLP (Talbert, 2017). The role of adult allies is also paramount in preparing young people to engage in policy and advocacy roles designed to create community change.

In preparing young people to engage in public policy, adults educate and engage youth in civic participation. Providing youth with opportunities to build skills and experience decision-making processes helps youth develop the capacity and confidence to actively participate. According to Kirshner (2007), “Apprenticeships can help youth learn how to adapt modes or argument to state legislatures, newsrooms, or school boards” (p. 359) and further establish an equal adult/youth partnership in leading campaigns where a common agenda is developed. Adults can be at the table with youth and foster their participation (Kirshner, 2007).

Another adult ally role involves supporting youth in building relationships with key policymakers. This is where adult allies may utilize their own connections, skills and resources to recruit adult decision-makers and engage them with the young people (Kirshner, 2007). Cultivating these relationships may include training and support for adults in the community to understand youth culture and engagement.

Adults in the community benefit greatly from youth engagement in decision-making:

- Adults begin to see youth as contributors, and stereotypes are broken down.
- Adult levels of commitment, attachment and energy for an organization often increase when they have an opportunity to work with youth
- Adults gain a better understanding of, and fresh perspective on, young people. This allows them to network with other youth and encourages enthusiasm, creativity, flexibility and pro-activeness (PeerNetBC, 2004).

The case study below demonstrates when adults thoughtfully prepare young people, they can be instrumental in the policy arena.

## CASE STUDY

Clearview High School's Youth 4 Youth Program in Lorain, Ohio is an example of how young people can engage in policy and advocacy. During the 2018-2019 school year, the district provided Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) training to all staff. While providing this training to school staff was important and appreciated, students were concerned they did not have access to similar resources. Students in Youth 4 Youth, a 9th-12th grade program at the high school, asserted that young people feel more comfortable talking to their peers about issues of mental health, depression, and suicide than they do talking to adults. Studies have shown that when young people encounter stress during the day, they cope better emotionally when they are with peers (Uink, Modecki, & Barber, 2016). As well, the GLSEN National School Climate Survey showed that 55.3% of young people did not seek out an adult in the building when they experienced bullying, victimization, or harassment because they didn't think anything would be done as a result of reporting the incident (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark & Truong, 2017). Youth 4 Youth decided to advocate for students to be equipped with the knowledge of YMHFA to provide maximum support to their peers. Students approached their adult advisors to explore available options for training opportunities and how they could get access to a YMHFA course. YMHFA was designed for adults age 18 and older (16 and older in limited situations). The possibility was floated of only having the students age 16-18 participate in YMHFA, but none of the trainers felt prepared to provide the training to students. Youth 4 Youth continued to explore their available options and through their adult advisor, the students were able to connect with staff from their county's mental health board. As a result of the conversation, two clinicians from mental health agencies in Lorain County partnered to put together a one-day training program for students. The training utilized materials from QPR Gatekeeper Training, YMHFA, and LifeSkills to ensure students were equipped to support their peers experiencing depression, anxiety, and mental health challenges.

Youth 4 Youth's efforts resulted in two key developments. First, students from nearby schools took notice and advocated for increased access to mental health training. Students at

Amherst Marion Steel High School, also in Lorain County, advocated for and received QPR Gatekeeper training in their school. Most notably, the Lorain County Mental Health Board has established a new mental health program that is now accessible to all students throughout the county. This case study highlights how, when supported by adults, youth can advocate for increased opportunities and ensure youth-centered policies and practices are established. The young people in this case study were able to directly impact their local environment and peers in a way that has relevance to them.

## CONCLUSION

Creating environments that support and empower youth to identify and respond to community needs through the engagement of formal and informal decision-making processes places them as the driving force behind policy and advocacy work and directs them toward continued responsive involvement in their future environments.

## AUTHORS



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Ohio University's Voinovich School and Leadership and Public Affairs and Prevention Action Alliance collaborated with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addition Services (OhioMHAS) to host a series of training and technical assistance (T/TA) activities for adult allies of youth-led programs. This series of white papers was developed by adult allies to support their peers who work with young people to use local data and evidence-based prevention strategies to create meaningful change within Ohio's communities. Dr. Jessica Collura, Ms. Aimee Collins, Dr. Holly Raffle and Mr. Zach Gheen of the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs supported Ohio's adult allies as they developed the white paper series. Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services Grant# 1900157 provided funding for the Youth-Led Training and Technical Assistance Project.