

Advancing Youth Voice and Changing the Narrative About Opportunity Youth

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About the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions

The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and support communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges. Launched in 2012 at the Aspen Institute, the Forum for Community Solutions envisions a future where communities create their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems that they face. The Forum for Community Solutions believes that if communities have more power to lead change, we will create a more just and equitable society.

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INTRODUCTION

The Aspen Institute **Forum for Community Solutions** (AIFCS), a program of the Aspen Institute established in 2012, seeks to highlight and support communities successfully engaging leaders and advocates across multiple sectors — government, nonprofit, business, and philanthropy — to collectively solve our society’s toughest social and economic challenges. Believing that when communities have more power to lead change we will be able to create a more just and equitable society, the AIFCS supports community collaboratives and backbone organizations to build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity using a collective impact or community collaboration approach to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.¹

The AIFCS’ **Opportunity Youth Forum** (OYF) began as a group of 21 community collaboratives and has grown to a network of more than two dozen urban, rural, and tribal communities seeking to scale reconnection and career pathways for youth and young adults. Roughly one-quarter (about 1.2 million) of all opportunity youth in the United States reside in or near OYF communities. Across the OYF network, communities are engaged in specific efforts to improve education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth.²

OYF collaboratives bring together multiple stakeholders (e.g., schools, community-based programs, postsecondary institutions, employers, youth leaders, government agencies) to remove barriers and improve the systems that serve opportunity youth. With a focus on creating integrated education and career pathways to reconnect opportunity youth to school and employment, OYF collaboratives are making it possible for young people to get back on track to successful adulthood. In addition to removing barriers and creating pathways of reconnection, OYF collaboratives are seeking to build awareness by identifying and sharing successful strategies, mobilizing stakeholders through knowledge and network development, advocating for effective policy, and catalyzing investments by encouraging funder partnerships. The network of OYF communities seeks to support community collaboratives to design innovative approaches aimed at advancing the most effective solutions for reconnecting opportunity youth.

To support their systems change work, OYF collaboratives work to transform two narratives about youth and young adults who are disconnected from school and work by (1) creating an asset-based frame by using the term “opportunity youth” (as opposed to “vulnerable youth,” “dropouts,” etc.), and (2) elevating recognition of the systematic — rather than individual — nature of challenges these youth and young adults face. These collaboratives are seeing their efforts pay off, with most finding that partners are beginning to focus on opportunity youth and young adults’ contributions and addressing the barriers to their success. In some communities, OYF collaboratives are intentionally focusing on promoting youth voice as a strategy for both fostering youth development and changing the narrative about opportunity youth and the challenges they face.

Adult allies in Boston, Massachusetts, and three California communities — Del Norte County and Tribal Lands, Oakland, and San Francisco — are partnering with young leaders to support youth in using their voice and telling their stories. This support extends both to helping youth develop their public speaking and

advocacy skills, and to changing public narratives about opportunity youth from a deficiency and challenge-based framework, in which young people struggle or lack ability, to a more asset-based framework, in which young people have strengths upon which to build and can make contributions to their communities. Youth and adults representing OYF collaboratives in these four communities came together for a roundtable discussion at the October 2019 OYF Convening in Aspen, Colorado, to further explore the connections between focus on youth voice and overall narrative change efforts led by these collaboratives.

Youth and Young Adult Panelists:

Jocelyn Gama, Oakland, California
Dottie Hatter, Del Norte County, California
Anna Lor, Del Norte County, California
Fernando Madrigal, San Francisco, California
Amanda Shabowich, Boston, Massachusetts

Adult Ally Panelists:

Breeanna Decker, Urban Strategies Council, Oakland, California
Kristin McSwain, Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative, Boston, Massachusetts
Amy Campbell Blair, True North, Del Norte and Tribal Lands, California
Kathy Almendares, Roadmap to Peace Initiative, San Francisco, California

This panel discussions addressed strategies to promote youth voice, the potential healing power of storytelling as well as pitfalls of encouraging young people to tell their stories, and ways young people are influencing public narratives to promote a greater understanding of the issues opportunity youth face. What follows is based on this conversation, as well as interviews with discussion participants prior to the panel.

YOUTH GAINING VOICE: PREPARING TO SPEAK UP OR TELL ONE'S STORY

OYF collaboratives encourage or amplify young people's voices in various ways as part of their community work. These strategies range from storytelling for personal development, to storytelling for use in public campaigns, to leadership development to equip young people with the skills they need to engage effectively in planning and advocating for effective youth programming.

"It's an important aspect of human development to be able to tell your story and being able to start at a young age is even better," says Breeanna Decker of Urban Strategies Council in Oakland. For this reason, some collaboratives focus on programming to help young people tell and own their stories. For instance, the Roadmap to Peace Initiative (RTP) in San Francisco encourages participants to talk about who they are in their own words. This is part of a larger strategy to provide young people with the strength to face challenging situations by teaching them to recognize who they are on the inside and see themselves apart from how other people may perceive them. Encouraging young people to tell their stories allows them to begin to share and value their ideas. As Dottie Hatter of Del Norte County explains, taking part in the Youth Training Academy³ "helped me to gain confidence in myself, opened my eyes to a broader perspective, helped me realize I do have a voice, and it's loud."

Other collaboratives highlight young people's stories in public campaigns focused on changing public perceptions of opportunity youth. In Del Norte and Tribal Lands, the opportunity youth collaborative uses young people's stories to engage public empathy and understanding of the barriers faced by opportunity youth face. Amy Campbell Blair of True North in Del Norte explains this further:

You don't have to use your story — it's yours. There's a benefit in learning what your story is without having to share it with the world. But if you can get a young person to dig deep and figure out what their self-interests are and then ask if they have the courage to step out and tell their story? Maybe they are ready, maybe not. I have to believe they have the power to use their voice.

Some collaboratives, such as the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative, focus more on preparing young people to speak up as equal partners with adult leaders on important civic issues. "We haven't focused on teaching youth to tell their stories," explains Kristin McSwain. "We've prepared them to be equal stakeholders. We've provided leadership development. If youth want to share their stories, they can." Boston's **Youth Voice Project** (YVP) hosted a series of "Intergenerational Conversations," workshops designed to foster cross-generational discussion about important social issues (e.g., community and police relations, the role of discipline in education, gender inequality, ageism) and enable adults to get to know youth in their community and see that young people want to be civically engaged and can advocate for themselves.

Whatever the initial emphasis, encouraging young people to speak up — and adults to listen — can lead to a variety of positive outcomes, such as youth empowerment and self-understanding, improved public empathy and understanding of issues facing young people, and improved youth programs and policies.

However, it is also possible to exploit young people's stories in ways that are disempowering. Nonprofit

organizations sometimes use young people's stories in advocacy or fundraising campaigns without regard for the individuals' desire to tell their story or the impact of the storytelling on them. In such situations, young people aren't able to own their story, and have no control over what, when, or how they share it. Sometimes youth are not provided with meaningful ways to serve as partners in the work of the organization other than sharing their story.

To avoid such extractive and harmful practices, programs and initiatives should do the following:

- Encourage young people to reflect on and understand their story as a powerful personal growth experience.
- Encourage a culture of treating personal stories as belonging to someone who may or may not choose to share that story in any given setting.
- Treat youth and young adults as equal partners who are no more obligated to share personal information than are staff.
- Provide numerous ways for young people to contribute meaningfully to important work.

STORYTELLING AS A HEALING PROCESS

Telling one's story can be healing and even transformative. Storytelling can validate one's experience, can designate that experience as important, and can offer solidarity with others sharing similar stories. Anna Lor, a Youth Training Academy alumnus in Del Norte County, explains:

They taught me my story was important, people needed to hear it, that I wasn't just a number. Being around lots of youth and hearing their stories and passion and what they wanted to do. Hearing how passionate they were, I realized that's what I had been like before I stopped caring. I realized I wanted to be that person again myself!

Having learned to tell his story as part of RTP in San Francisco, Fernando Madrigal says he is better able to manage his emotions. "You can't just hold everything in," he explains. "That's how I got my felony. What if I could have shown my emotions instead? Storytelling is me being able to let that feeling out."

Even further, sharing one's story can lead to positive community changes. Madrigal explains the relief he feels knowing his story has helped to end juvenile detention in his community:

San Francisco is [the] first city in [the] country to shut down its juvenile detention center. Being able to tell my story, being formerly incarcerated in juvenile hall. Being able to advocate for people from my background — juvenile justice, incarceration, foster care — feels like there is hope for us. There's hope it's coming to an end with shutting down juvenile hall.

Kathy Almendares of RTP in San Francisco agrees storytelling is an important healing tool, explaining "My ancestors have been using it this way forever. It's powerful." Almendares stresses that storytelling is

potentially healing for both young people *and* the adults who work with them. "Not only are we giving them space to heal, but they are giving us space to speak on certain things too. Listening to them and receiving that knowledge from them, when they are my teacher in the moment, is healing to me."

The AIFCS is in the process of testing a healing-centered organizing framework that includes sharing and reflecting on lived experiences as one of the many strategies that organizations can implement to support the well-being of young community organizers. Storytelling has the potential to help young people heal from trauma, especially when it is paired with other practices that support the well-being of young people and their communities.⁴

Despite its potential as a source of healing, telling one's story can also be retraumatizing. For this reason, it is important to ensure young people know that they are in charge of deciding what they are comfortable

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sharing in any given situation, and to provide them with strategies for paying attention to any potential signs of trauma that can emerge when telling their stories.

To do this, youth programs should do the following:

- Encourage reflection to allow young people to process their experiences and emotions.
- Offer youth the opportunity to participate in healing circles or other social support structures.
- Provide young people with information on self-care.
- Model prioritizing healing over opportunities to speak at events.

YOUTH INFLUENCING THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE

Opportunity youth are using their stories to change public perception of who they are and the challenges they face. They are asking, even demanding, to be seated at planning tables; and when they join these tables, they are demonstrating their worth as critical partners. Opportunity youth's stories are often compelling illustrations of the structural and systemic barriers they face to succeed in education, employment, and transitions to adulthood. In addition to changing ideas, they are changing public policy.

Youth and their adult allies stress that, when seeking to change the public narrative about opportunity youth, it's important to remember *whose* narratives these are. Young people rightfully contend that they should be seated at the tables where decisions that affect their lives are being made and that these policy

decisions need to be informed by their lived experiences.

Amanda Shabowich, former project coordinator of the YVP in Boston, explains the importance of youth voice and young people's lived experience to discussions about youth programming, "How do I show up in a space as well as talking about my peers' experiences so that when folks are theorizing and talking about data, I can talk about what's actually happening and what our experiences actually are?" System planners and youth service providers need to recognize young people as important partners in the work to improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

Young people's stories can provide vivid and compelling descriptions of the challenges opportunity youth face in education and transitions to adulthood. In fact, some

community collaboratives, such as the Oakland-Alameda County Opportunity Youth Collaborative and the Del Norte County and Tribal Lands Opportunity Youth Initiative, have launched public campaigns focused on these stories to influence public perception of opportunity youth. The intent is to go beyond numbers to tell individual stories of opportunity youth to promote greater understanding of the barriers to their success and empathy for young people among community members. In Oakland, reports Decker, this strategy has changed the local culture to create an authentic demand to include young people at planning tables.

Youth and young adults, through both their lived experiences and their expertise, use their voices to advocate for improved outcomes for opportunity youth in their communities and across the country. For example, in response to a small group of young people presenting on peace and safety to the police chief and community stakeholders, the city of Oakland created the Department of Violence Prevention. The mayor and city council have asked young people to continue to advise on this work. Jocelyn Gama, a former

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intern with Urban Strategies Council in Oakland, asserts, “Youth leaders appreciate knowing their stories can take them places and can change the narrative and one day policies around these issues.” Decker underscores this idea, noting, “When you talk about power — to be able to be taken seriously — that’s transformational.” Meanwhile in Boston, YVP peer leaders spent a lot of time sharing together, as well as listening to young people across the city.

Explains Shabowich, “When there were rallies about fully funding schools, or as we neared the 2016 election, we were able to advocate for what we knew opportunity youth experienced and cared about.”

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UNDERSTANDING AND CENTERING YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

OYF network members have made youth-led change central to their work, maintaining a strong commitment to the view that young people have the right to represent their interests, identify their challenges, and design their own solutions.⁵

Encouraging youth voice and storytelling offers young people important paths to healing and critical leadership development skills, such as public speaking, meeting facilitation, and community organizing. “I’m in amazement of these young people. We are asking them to be vulnerable and tear down walls that they’ve used to protect themselves,” says Almendares. “Storytelling is not a new concept.

“You can’t work with youth and not listen to youth and what works for them! We have to try new things. Having youth in leadership positions is key to this.”

We hear about ancestors and indigenous folks — the power of storytelling and the ability to heal through telling stories.”

In addition, argues Madrigal, young people’s expertise is a necessary component of effective youth program planning, explaining, “You can’t work with youth and not listen to youth and what works for them! We have to try new things. Having youth in leadership positions is key to this.” In fact, young

people have demonstrated to adults that their presence at tables, and in leadership positions, is critical. For instance, in Boston, adults leading youth organizations had not always cooperated well with one another. Explains McSwain,

“The adults were the barrier to the young people partnering. One of the things ... YVP [was] able to do was to ask the youth to solve certain problems we couldn’t solve. They took that to heart and formed alliances across the city that we had not been able to form.”

Understanding this, the OYF network has always included youth and young adults as equal partners in all aspects of its work. “The intergenerational approach,” notes Jamiel Alexander, senior fellow with the AIFCS, “has allowed us to grow and develop within this network.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Forum for Community Solutions works in partnership with many different communities. The following set of core values informs these partnerships:
 - **Community and Constituent Centered:**
We believe in the power of community and in the central role of community members to lead the change and advance individual and community change — particularly those most impacted by issues and historically furthest from influence and decision making.
 - **Equity:**
Equity is just and fair inclusion in a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. We believe that solutions are not successful if they don't produce greater equity for groups that have historically been excluded from opportunities.
 - **Justice:**
There is no equity without justice, and no justice without equity. We must courageously create a fair society that provides opportunity to all; to accomplish this, we must shift balances of power to increase the influence of those who have traditionally been denied power.
 - **Collaboration:**
We believe we can go further together than apart. Only through genuine, trust-based collaboration can significant community and systems challenges be addressed and resolved.
 - **Respect:**
We are humbled by the strength and courage of the communities we seek to support, and do our work with the deepest respect. Only through earning their respect and building trust can we be successful in our work.
 - **Love:**
We believe that long-lasting, sustained change of some of our society's most difficult problems is based in having a deeper love of humanity — a greater compassion, empathy, and understanding for all people that is bigger than any one of us.
 - **Accountable Impact:**
We are results-oriented; we seek to ensure that solutions produce real, equitable results that meaningfully improve people's lives. We seek to get to impact with a deep sense of organizational responsibility and with accountability to the communities we serve.
 - **Learning Together:**
We believe in the power of learning and knowledge as an engine for change, and that learning together, with and across communities, can only happen where there is mutual respect.
- 2 Figure internally calculated by the AIFCS, based on Measure of America city and/or county-level estimates of opportunity youth populations in the US. Retrieved from <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/impact/>. These data are outdated due to the pandemic and economic crisis; however, it is reasonable to assume that a large proportion of opportunity youth in the US still reside in OYF communities.

- 3 Youth Training Academy a six-week summer program for youth from 10th grade to age 24 that supports work skills and leadership development and provides youth with an opportunity to explore one of several career pathways associated with existing workforce needs in the region.
- 4 For more information on healing-centered organizing, see Jimenez, Eli, Tokunaga, Jessica, & Wolin, Jessica. (November 2019). Scan of the field of healing-centered organizing: lessons learned. Retrieved from <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/scan-of-the-field-of-healing-centered-organizing-lessons-learned/>.
- 5 For a full discussion of how OYF collaboratives are engaging youth and young adults in youth programs and system development, see Miles, Monique, & Nemoy, Yelena. (February 2018). Including all voices: achieving opportunity youth collaboration success through youth and adult engagement. Retrieved from <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/including-all-voices/>.