



Youth Commissions and Councils Promote Leadership and Participation

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By Terry Amsler



City and county youth commissions and councils provide opportunities for youth service and development and offer young people a means for their voices to be heard in local government decision-making.

According to information gathered by the Institute for Local Government's Collaborative Governance Initiative, more than 100 such commissions are at work throughout California (a complete list is online at www.ca-ilg.org/youthcommissions).

Youth commissions' work spans a wide range, as the following examples illustrate.

In **La Cañada Flintridge**, the youth council makes recommendations to the city council on youth-related issues. Its members serve as liaisons to community groups and contribute to a monthly column in the local newspaper. The youth council established objectives for a citywide youth master plan intended to encourage additional avenues for youth participation, and in 2007 members surveyed local businesses regarding tobacco sales to minors.

In **Fremont**, the youth advisory commission advises the city council on policy issues affecting young people and has worked with the Police Department on a proposed curfew ordinance. Each year, the commission also organizes a one-day Junior High Leadership Conference that helps junior-high school students prepare for the transition to high school.

In **San Carlos**, youth advisory council members are participating in the city's general strategic planning process as well as health and wellness programming and are preparing for "Youth Vote" during the November 2008 election. They have raised funds for a number of charitable activities, including a new youth center, and organize volunteer events to involve other youth in the community. San Carlos businesses that welcome young people receive a "Young Consumer Champion" award from the council.

The **Pomona Youth Advisory Committee (PYAC)** is working with the city and agencies serving youth to advocate for the development of a youth and family master plan to promote youth health and safety. In support of this work, PYAC hosts an annual mentor-protégé dinner to engage youth and adult leaders to partner on local issues. PYAC also partners with the City Clerk's Office and Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder

Voter Education Division to expand the Student Poll Worker Training to six local high schools. Youth commissioners also organize an annual "Rock the Vote" voter education event and have developed the Pomona Youth Leadership Network, composed of major youth-serving leadership groups, to bring more youth voices into city decision-making.

In **El Dorado County**, the youth commission helped write a Green Resolution and supported its successful passage. The resolution sets forth goals to lessen the environmental footprint of county residents in areas including waste and energy usage reduction, planning, construction and air quality. Members are presently engaged in developing partners and offering input related to possibly reopening the local skate park. The commission and University of California Cooperative Extension have also received grant funding to create maps of youth skills and resources in El Dorado County using GPS systems and mapping software. The maps will be used to create a guide for young people seeking school activities, clubs, health care, counseling and other resources. The commission hosted its first annual Youth Fest in July 2008, an all-day event for middle- and high-school youth.

The **San Francisco Youth Commission** is collaborating with the city's school district, Department of Elections and others on YouthVOTE, an election and civic engagement project that gives high-school students an opportunity to voice their opinions about current youth issues, ballot measures and candidates.

Impacts on Communities

Effective youth commissions and councils empower young people to bring about change in their communities. These forums can help identify the issues that are most important to these often overlooked members of the community and facilitate bringing youth ideas and recommendations to the attention of local policy-makers on a regular basis.

Youth councils and commissions can:

- Initiate educational campaigns;
- Encourage other young people to participate in local civic and political activities; and
- Create new community resources for residents of all ages.

Successful commissions and councils also provide an arena where youth voices are nurtured and the skills and habits of civic engagement and citizenship are acquired. For many youth commissioners, this experience is their first exposure to local government's role and function.

Key Elements of Successful Commissions

Each youth commission or council responds to community needs and the issues that led to its creation. While many factors contribute to their success, a few are particularly important.

Staffing. Commissions need staff who have the time to work with them and understand youth leadership, development and empowerment. Young people brought into such leadership and service roles need appropriate support, skills, confidence, networks and access to decision-makers, all of which require the time, commitment and consistent attention of skilled staff.

Diversity of Membership. As appropriate to each city or county, youth members should vary by geographic region, ethnicity, socioeconomic background and gender. Inclusiveness encourages equality, gives credibility to the commission and provides opportunities for youth to work toward a common purpose with others of different backgrounds and experiences.

An Appropriate Budget. Youth commissions require adequate resources to become active and effective and fulfill the purposes for which they were established. In addition to support for staff, resources may also include the costs of stipends for youth; meeting expenses, transportation and other costs associated with membership, meetings and participation; training and skills development to build commission competence and confidence; support for communication, education and outreach to increase youth and other public awareness of the commission; and expenses related to the specific projects and activities of the commission or council.

Youth Should "Own" It. Unless the budget, project selection and the commission meeting agenda are appropriately "owned" by the youth members, participation will often be lax and less focused. This doesn't mean members should work without guidance from staff or that encouraging greater ownership always succeeds. However, the best results usually occur when youth have had their own "Ah ha!" moment, have decided what needs to be done, and are carrying the work forward with support -- not direction -- from staff.

Access to Public Agency Decision-Makers. Creating an environment where youth voices are heard and respected is fundamental. When youth commissions are asked to provide input into actions or decisions of their local government, they must have regular access to appropriate information and the officials with whom they must communicate. Local agency commissions, councils and boards should provide information to youth commissioners and invite their participation.

The staff of departments whose work may be of particular interest to youth commissions should attend and report to commission meetings on a regular basis, and they should invite youth commission participation in their own meetings and decision-making process.

When creating public engagement processes for new local plans, budgets or other initiatives, youth commissions should be asked to help design vehicles to ensure youth participation.

Enhancing Youth Commission Capacity. Each youth member will bring his or her own strengths and interests to a youth commission or council. However, not everyone has the skills or experience necessary for successful participation. Provide an orientation, information-sharing sessions or training for youth appropriate to the commission's focus. Topics may include understanding local government, media advocacy, meeting

facilitation, public speaking, community mapping, community dynamics, youth-adult partnerships and youth-led evaluation and research.

Focus Beyond Youth Commission Members.

Although a youth commission may be composed of a diverse group of young people who act as the community's "youth voice," the experiences and opinions of one group cannot speak for all its peers. In order to represent the needs and concerns of its peers, a youth commission can conduct communitywide surveys and

evaluations to determine the initiatives it will undertake. Broad outreach is an important component of youth commission success. Holding open forums to invite additional youth participation and input is a great way to strengthen and increase the commission's effectiveness.

Resources

The Institute for Local Government (ILG) is collecting youth commission-related stories from throughout California and posting them on its website along with a number of youth engagement and development resources (www.ca-ilg.org/youthengagement). An ILG guide to developing effective youth commissions is forthcoming, and ILG's Collaborative Governance Initiative has initiated an e-newsletter for youth commission staff, which contains helpful ideas and resources. A session on developing effective youth commissions will be offered at the League of California Cities 2008 Annual Conference in Long Beach, Friday, Sept. 26 from 11:15 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Two currently available resources include *Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy-Making* from the Forum for Youth Investment (www.forumfyi.org) and *Youth Engagement in Leadership and Learning*, a curriculum designed to promote and support active youth engagement in the local community, available from the John W. Gardner Center (<http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu>).

Share Your Success Story

Has a youth commission or council made important contributions to your community? The Institute for Local Government (ILG) wants to hear about it. Send a brief description to Carmen Pereira, ILG program assistant; e-mail: cpereira@ca-ilg.org. ILG will add your item to the youth engagement pages of its website. Questions? Call (916) 658-8208.

This article originally ran in *Western City Magazine*. Terry Amsler is program director of the Institute for Local Government's Collaborative Governance Initiative and can be reached at tamsler@ca-ilg.org. This article draws on material developed by the Youth Leadership Institute (www.yli.org); Bryce Skolfield, director of public policy for the Children's Council of San Francisco; and the Institute for Local Government. For more information about the Collaborative Governance Initiative, visit www.ca-ilg.org/cgi.
