

Hosting a Successful Youth Ambassador Program

NATIONAL
COUNCIL
for Mental
Wellbeing

Lessons for youth-serving professionals from the Getting Candid campaign

BACKGROUND

Concern over youth mental health as a public health issue has heightened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2021, 42% of students felt persistently sad or hopeless for a period of at least two weeks, while 22% seriously considered attempting suicide (CDC, 2023). Poor youth mental health is a significant concern given its impact on physical health, educational performance and risk of substance use (CDC, 2023). Most adults who develop a substance use disorder begin using substances in their teenage years and in young adulthood (CDC, 2022). These elevated concerns around youth mental health and substance use underscore the importance of developing effective youth-focused initiatives to address them.

There is a growing shift toward engaging youth as co-designers in youth-focused health initiatives to identify and implement best practices (Office of Population Affairs, 2020). The groups of youth who participate in informing these youth-led initiatives are often referred to as youth advisory councils or youth ambassador programs (YAPs). Youth ambassadors can support youth-focused initiatives by reviewing materials, speaking on panels and webinars, and providing new ideas related to social media, influencers and content style. YAPs embody the philosophy “nothing about us without us,”* by giving youth a voice in programs focused on them. Youth involvement ensures accuracy and authenticity of language and delivery used to reach young people.

The National Council for Mental Wellbeing’s [Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention](#) project supported youth-serving providers and organizations in their efforts to prevent youth substance use. In 2021, Getting Candid project staff recruited a group of youth ages 15–18 to inform the development and dissemination of the project’s resources. Over the course of the three-year project, 16 youths provided insight into campaign direction, supporting material development and sharing their experiences as young people.

This resource distills lessons learned from the Getting Candid YAP.

“Throughout the process I got to work on blog posts, be on a panel with experts in the field, review and edit National Council resources, and engage in countless meetings with other ambassadors. I really benefited from those group conversations because I trusted the group, we talked about deep personal experiences, and it was really beneficial for bouncing ideas off of each other.”

— **Sammy**, *Getting Candid Youth Ambassador*



*This phrase was initially popularized as a mantra for the disability rights movement.

Disclaimer: The photos featured are stock images and are not indicative of the characteristics or appearances of the youth ambassadors.

What do projects gain from YAPs?

An active YAP is key for successful youth project creation and implementation (Office of Population Affairs, 2020; Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, n.d.; French et al, 2014). Incorporating positive youth development (PYD) core components, such as youth voice and feedback, into project creation can result in more effective outcomes for youth than programs without PYD core components (Office of Population Affairs, 2020; Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, n.d.). Youth have significant insight into how to reach their peers and what type and style of content will resonate best (French et. al., 2014). When youth projects and interventions are created for health care settings, young people should also be seen as the experts in their own health care needs (Youth Healthcare Alliance, 2023). In feedback for Getting Candid, providers shared that hearing directly from youth was refreshing and powerful.



Getting Candid as a Case Study: Getting Candid’s YAP brought key perspectives to the project process and deliverables. Youth ambassadors provided feedback on social media video content, structure and sharing to increase engagement and reach. Their unique insight contributed to the development and diversity of project resources, including fact sheets, social media posts, videos, and website content and structure. The following resources directly feature or were authored by youth ambassadors, and can be found in the [Youth Voice](#) section of the Getting Candid webpage, as well as [Getting Candid About Mental Health and Substance Use](#), Getting Candid’s youth-facing webpage.



“Youth are aware of specific current events that have relevance to projects, youth themselves can learn and be educated through their active involvement.”

— Tracy, **Getting Candid Youth Ambassador**



- [Share Your Why Videos](#) - Youth ambassadors share why they choose not to engage in substance use and their personal strategies for avoiding substance use.
- [Getting Candid: What Youth Want You to Know](#) - Youth ambassadors share how health care providers and trusted adults can create safer spaces to talk about substance use and mental health.
- [Preventing Illicit Drug Use on College Campuses, COVID-19’s Lasting Impact on Youth Mental Health and Substance Use, De-stressing and Improving Mental Health](#) and [Peer Pressure and Substance Use](#), blog posts — Youth ambassadors write about issues close to them.
- Participation in in-person summit — In 2023, four youth ambassadors traveled to Los Angeles to be panelists for the Getting Candid Youth Substance Use Prevention Summit. Health care providers and administrators attending the summit expressed sincere appreciation for the ambassadors’ authenticity and perspective. Many attendees wrote that the most useful part of the summit was “hearing from young people” and “the youth and peer perspective.”

What do youth gain from YAPs?

YAPs increase youth receptivity to project activities and positively influence personal and professional development of participating youth. In addition to supporting project development, young people who participate in youth ambassador or youth advisory roles often develop leadership skills and agency to further influence positive social movements (School Based Health Alliance, 2022). Youth ambassadors shape how information is shared with their peers and can advocate for youth interests and needs.



“Young people can bring new issues to the conversation or prioritize what issues/projects to tackle from a youth perspective.”

— **Sammy, *Getting Candid Youth Ambassador***



Getting Candid as a Case Study: By participating in Getting Candid’s YAP, youth ambassadors gained opportunities for:

1. **Learning** — Getting Candid youth ambassadors learned about mental health and substance use and gained insight into how nonprofits and other programs function.
2. **Connecting** — Getting Candid youth ambassadors engaged with nationally esteemed experts, received coaching from project staff, developed peer relationships and improved desired skills such as blog writing, social media dissemination and marketing (See “Example YAP activities and suggested frequency”).
3. **Compensation** — Getting Candid youth ambassadors were compensated with gift cards for their work, encouraged to include their experience on their resume, and could request letters of recommendation from Getting Candid staff — rewards that emphasized the inherent value of their voices as young people and the importance of their participation.

“Youth ambassadors can connect with each other and offer advice and support. In our monthly meetings, participants are free to open up about personal issues in their lives, and we often go around sharing similar experiences or giving advice. It’s a really safe space and it benefits the youth ambassador on a personal level. It also offers new perspectives to the project leaders, health care providers and other experts we talk to.”

— **Sammy, *Getting Candid Youth Ambassador***

FIVE STEPS TO ESTABLISH A YOUTH AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

STEP 1: DETERMINE AND ARTICULATE YAP PURPOSE

Youth-serving organizations and professionals intending to develop a YAP should start by establishing their YAP's purpose. YAP planning activities should engage relevant staff and stakeholders — including youth — and incorporate data from organizational and community needs assessments. Determine how the YAP can best contribute to project objectives and where it may be integrated (e.g., project design, evaluation or communications). Including youth in YAP planning efforts helps to ensure alignment between YAP operations and youth capacity and intention.

It's also important that project teams determine what they are looking for in a youth ambassador to inform the application and scoring process. Articulating roles clearly can help youth identify opportunities to satisfy their curiosity or develop specific skills as they match their interest to project needs.



CASE STUDY: Youth ambassadors were an essential component of the Getting Candid project's success. The primary purpose of the youth ambassador program was to incorporate youth voice to ensure authenticity and accuracy of project direction, resources and dissemination efforts. With the support of youth ambassadors, the Getting Candid team created resources, launch social media campaigns and provide insight relevant and compatible with today's young people to guide providers.

STEP 2: ESTABLISH CLEAR, YOUTH-FRIENDLY STAFFING

YAP programs and staff need to practice understanding and flexibility with expectations and communication. Sometimes youth participation will fluctuate or be unexpectedly short-term, resulting from factors as straightforward as a shift of interest or moving away to college, or more complex needs like family crises. Organizations should provide training and designate staff time for communicating with and supporting youth ambassadors.

- Relevant training or workshops may be centered around listening to and validating youth, building connection with them, and more. When communicating with youth, YAP staff should practice flexible thinking, open and welcoming approaches to conversations, and communicating through platforms and at times that work best for the youth. These [Six Recommendations to Create Safer Spaces for Young People](#) contribute to an environment that allows youth to participate authentically.
- Youth-friendly staffing should include adequate staff time to dedicate to YAP development, communicating with and supporting youth, and detailed review and feedback of youth-created materials. It's helpful to establish clear roles among staff to support effective communication and workflow.



CASE STUDY: Getting Candid's youth ambassador activities were overseen by a project coordinator, who acted as the primary communications liaison and coordinated activities, and a project manager, who provided strategic direction and supported communication, meeting facilitation and work planning. Both contributed to the creation of a safer space through shared experience (having recently been students), warm communication, transparency, individual relationship building and designated time for youth to learn about each other during regular meetings. Project staff reviewed content created by youth ambassadors and facilitated youth ambassador development and review of project materials. The project director approved youth ambassador compensation recommendations and content direction. Other project staff offered support as needed, such as reviewing youth ambassador applications and content.

STEP 3: ESTABLISH COMPENSATION AND ENGAGEMENT EXPECTATIONS

Based on the purpose and functions that your team articulated in Step 1, determine expectations for the time and effort of YAP members, recognizing the need for flexible expectations. It is important to clearly communicate the frequency, depth and duration of participation, any expected deliverables, the degree of flexibility afforded (Can youth shift or terminate their engagement based on their availability or change their role within program needs based on interests?), and the compensation and/or recognition youth will receive for their contributions. Compensation for time and engagement is an essential part of working with youth and should be included in the program budget.

It is helpful to create expectations regarding compensation and time commitment in advance, reviewing for uniformity, understanding and equity. This can be done in the form of a YAP commitment letter or engagement agreement that clearly outlines the time commitment, attendance and other expectations. Consent forms and engagement agreements are essential onboarding components for programs and their YAP to establish clear expectations up front. Pair documentation with opportunities for in-person or virtual onboarding, offering background, rationale and time for questions. Create open bidirectional lines of communication so youth can reach out for information as needed, and staff can check in with youth to ensure comfort.



CASE STUDY: The National Council compensated Getting Candid youth ambassadors for their time and efforts with Amazon or Visa gift cards. Compensation ranged from \$25-\$200 per activity, most commonly at \$25/hour for anticipated time spent on an activity. Youth ambassadors were also compensated with gift cards for attending monthly meetings. Though Getting Candid compensated on a per activity basis, you may also consider providing an overall stipend for general commitment and communication, in addition to activity compensation, if funding allows. This would cover the time youth ambassadors spend on communication and other ongoing activities.

STEP 4: RECRUIT YAP APPLICANTS WITH PURPOSE

Plan to invest staff time and, where possible, program funding into recruitment to reach a diverse group of youth ambassadors with experience and interests that match the expectations and needs of the YAP. Organizations may want to advertise the YAP opportunity on social media, using options to target ads by demographics to effectively reach young people. Targeted outreach may also include promoting the opportunity through partner organizations. Be prepared with a clear onboarding process for selected applicants!



CASE STUDY: The Getting Candid team conducted two rounds of youth ambassador recruitment over the course of the Getting Candid project. Each round included targeted outreach, social media advertising and emails to the National Council listserv. The youth ambassador application was an online survey that asked for contact information, demographic information and three short answer responses about the applicant's connection to and interest in youth mental health and substance use. The Getting Candid team created a scoring rubric for applications and reviewed them after the application deadline. Completed applications were downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet and ranked based on the scoring rubric, including factors such as diversity of region, ethnicity/race, age and gender, as well as the quality of short answers. After notifying and confirming interest with potential youth ambassadors, staff gave them information about the program, shared a consent and release form for youth and parent signatures, and invited ambassadors to a virtual welcome meeting to learn more about the National Council, Getting Candid and their role.

STEP 5: DEVELOP YAP ACTIVITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Following the onboarding process, organizations can create more specific descriptions of YAP engagement opportunities, the time commitment each opportunity requires and corresponding compensation. You may wish to offer activities for YAP members to select from, or work with youth to direct their efforts based on their interests and skill sets. Staff should meet monthly with youth ambassadors for ongoing engagement and progress checks, with availability for ad hoc communications throughout. YAP staff need to have the capacity to support youth ambassador needs through engagement activities and should be realistic about the amount of staff time and support engagement opportunities may require. Programs can solicit youth feedback regarding capacity, expertise and interest in the engagement opportunities offered. As the program progresses, YAP feedback and ideas for innovation can inform its own functioning to provide a more enjoyable and productive experience for all.



CASE STUDY: After finding that Google Drive was indicated as most accessible by youth ambassadors, Getting Candid utilized Google Docs to share a virtual sign-up sheet with opportunities for youth ambassador engagement. The sheet included categories such as social media and video, writing and review. Within each category there was a description of the proposed activity, estimated time commitment, compensation amount and place for youth ambassadors to sign up for activities. Youth ambassadors were generally selected on a first-come, first-served basis, with interest and equity of opportunity kept in mind. Getting Candid youth ambassadors also attended monthly meetings to discuss progress on activities, talk about national events and develop relationships. Recognizing that many youth ambassadors are busy students and have various extracurriculars, Getting Candid staff accommodated availability and varying time zones by using surveys and polls to schedule, and hosted events at times best for students, including evenings when necessary.



“The people were extremely impactful on me. Hearing their stories and struggles taught me more than any classroom could. I also had unbelievable experiences serving on a youth panel in LA and an Instagram Live in December. Thanks for the memories and the knowledge I have gained!”

— Erik, **Getting Candid Youth Ambassador**



“I enjoyed most working with other youth ambassadors who were involved in mental health advocacy work and being a part of a national network that could come together and move forward in our efforts. My experience with the Getting Candid project was great and really opened my eyes that prevention communication can be conducted in various ways. I am thankful for the opportunities I had to speak with providers in a podcast conducted through Twitter, speak on ways providers have been effective through Instagram Live, acted out scenarios and roleplay videos, edited messaging guides that are made for the National Council for Mental Wellbeing website and more.”

— Tracy, **Getting Candid Youth Ambassador**



Examples of YAP activities and recommended frequency:

RECOMMENDED FREQUENCY	YAP ACTIVITY
Ongoing	<p>Communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Share a regular email update or message (if the group is connected via WhatsApp or a similar platform) on what’s happening at your organization. ■ Provide opportunities for youth to ask about current trends in youth mental health and substance use and to learn more about their passion areas, potentially through a question-and-answer box or chat forum. ■ Create space for youth to collaborate, connect and network.
Monthly or biweekly	<p>Meetings with youth ambassadors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide youth ambassadors the opportunity to connect with one another to build community, mutual support and encouragement. ■ Offer time for discussions where youth can raise new topics from social media or school settings and express interest in guest speakers and topics for training. ■ Provide updates on project progress and opportunities for engagement.
Bimonthly	<p>Engagement opportunities for youth ambassadors such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Review youth-focused materials, provide feedback and offer suggestions for engagement. ■ Participate in webinars, workshops and panels. ■ Write and edit blog posts. ■ Participate in group projects and collaboration opportunities. ■ Feature in or produce videos about youth mental health.
Variable	<p>Professional development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Train youth ambassadors about the mission of your organization. ■ Provide individual mentoring to youth ambassadors. ■ Enable youth ambassadors to attend conferences.

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APPENDIX

YOUTH AMBASSADOR CONSENT FORM

*Parent/guardian signature is required for participants under age 18

Dear Participant, Parent or Legal Guardian,

You/your child has been invited to participate in the National Council for Mental Wellbeing's (National Council) [Youth Substance Use and Message Development During COVID-19](#) initiative as a Youth Ambassador. Youth Ambassadors for the project can choose to participate in an array of activities from January 2022-January 2023 and have the opportunity to:

- Share their perspectives and experiences with social and digital media and/or drug and alcohol prevention campaigns;
- Contribute to project deliverable creation and dissemination support such as writing blog posts, participating in webinars, and developing original digital content;
- Provide feedback on youth-facing materials, such as language guides and fact sheets, that will be used by providers and organizations.

Benefits and Risks: The benefit of participation in this opportunity is to inform a national initiative to prevent drug and alcohol use among youth 12-18 years, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Participants will receive payment in the form of gift cards based on the activity or number of hours contributed.** For more payment information please visit [Opportunities for Engagement.] There are no known risks to your child as a result of participating as a Youth Ambassador.

Participation Release: By signing this form, I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older, or I am the parent or legal guardian of the child named below, and I hereby grant the National Council the right to reach out for participation in project activities. I consent to participation as a Youth Ambassador for the National Council, including, but not limited to: monthly meetings, email correspondence, providing feedback on resources, and participating in videos.

Media Release: By signing this form, I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older, or I am the parent or legal guardian of the child named below, and I hereby grant the National Council the right to use photographs, quotes, images, audio and video recordings of my child to publicly promote the *Youth Substance Use and Message Development During COVID-19* initiative. I understand that these may be used in any promotional materials, including but not limited to: print publications, online publications, presentations, websites and social media. I hereby authorize and their name and likeness, for use in the National Council's print, online, and video-based marketing materials. I hereby release and hold harmless the National Council from any reasonable expectation of privacy or confidentiality for the minor listed associated with the deliverables specified above.

Questions: If you have any questions about the Youth Ambassador Program, you may contact [Staff Name] at [email].

I understand the information above. I consent to participating as a Youth Ambassador under the conditions stated above. If under the age of 18, _____ (parent/guardian's name), gives permission for their child to participate as a Youth Ambassador under the conditions stated above.

Youth Name: _____ **Youth Signature:** _____

If under the age of 18, please complete the following:

Name of parent/guardian: _____

Signature of parent/guardian: _____

Date: _____

Once signed, please email this completed form to [Staff Name] at [email] by [date].