



# YOUTH COUNCIL MANUAL

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A youth council is a formal body made up of youth, typically ages 14 to 18, who advise decision makers, give youth a meaningful role in planning, and engage with the organization's staff in the decision-making process and larger community concerns. This manual is intended to serve as a guide for non-profit organizations on how to establish and support a youth council.

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# Appendix B

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### MISSION AND PURPOSE

A youth council is a formal body made up of youth, typically ages 14 to 18, who advise decision makers, give youth a meaningful role in planning, and engage with program staff in the decision-making process and larger community concerns.

The purpose of the Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont Youth Council is to provide Goodwill youth participants with leadership experience, serve as a resource for Goodwill in getting feedback regarding its practices and impact, and engage youth in outreach to the community. The goals of a successful council will include:

- Leadership and Life Skills Development
- Program Planning and Evaluation
- Outreach
- Advocacy
- Community Service

### BEST PRACTICES

#### Determine Sustainable Council Membership

Youth councils generally have between 10 and 20 members. Youth council members tend to serve two-year terms. Youth Council members' terms should be staggered to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of youth who remain from one year to the next. Groups generally involve members from ages 14 to 18.

A set of expectations needs to be developed so that council member applicants are clear about the commitment. These expectations should be included in the membership application. The expectations of memberships should include the date and time of youth council meetings, youth council coordinator contact information, attendance expectations, and the process for excused absences. To establish regular attendance, it is best to establish an attendance requirement.

A monetary stipend or scholarship should be considered to reward youth council participants for regular participation. They should be encouraged to look at this experience as a "job". Some youth councils require that youth participants pay small "dues" from the stipends they receive as a way of learning about income, expenses, and budgets.

As the council develops, the group will create their own charter, code of conduct, budget, and membership handbook with a defined youth leadership structure. It is important that youth work on

the “business” of running the council at every session. A typical monthly meeting might include the first 20 to 30 minutes of the meeting to be dedicated to the business of organizing and developing the youth council.

Creating a sub-group within the council to complete certain work may be an efficient and meaningful strategy for quickly getting jobs done. The sub-groups could be committees, leadership teams, or work groups.

### Ensuring a Sound Infrastructure

The primary costs for youth councils are staffing, transportation, and meeting expenses. Youth councils that receive pro-bono staff time and cover a small geographic area, limiting transportation costs, can function effectively with relatively small budgets, around \$1,000. This \$1,000 does not include stipends paid to participants.

Consistency and long-term commitment is key. In the start-up phase of the youth council, youth participation may be erratic. It is important that the organizational commitment to the council be long-term. Youth councils should also be institutionalized so that they exist beyond a change in administration. Many youth have experienced “here today, gone tomorrow” programs. It may take up to a year to have an established program with regular attendance. Persistence is key.

### Providing a Supportive Work Environment

Staff support is one of the most important determinations in establishing a successful youth council. Staff should be experienced youth workers with time dedicated to supporting the work of the youth council. Staff should be committed to the 10 Principles of Positive Youth Development as they relate to youth councils:

1. The constant presence of caring, knowledgeable adults.
2. The presentation of challenging and clear goals and activities.
3. Community involvement in the youth council.
4. Engaging and meaningful community service activities.
5. The integration of life and leadership skills into the program.
6. Long-term relationship and support.
7. Access to other support services.
8. Work-based, hands-on, or experiential learning.
9. Youth leading youth.
10. Continuous feedback and evaluation from youth and other participants.

Experienced and knowledgeable staff with a long-term commitment to make the youth council work is fundamental. A well thought out staffing plan can elevate the youth council from “just another agency” to a meaningful, life-changing organization for youth. Positive youth development training

and other professional development opportunities for staff who support the youth council are worthwhile investments.

The location and place for youth council gatherings is also important. Successful youth councils provide a dedicated space where members can do their work. The space should be inviting to youth with some comfortable group seating and access to technology like a computer and music player docking station. Many organizations provide an exclusive space for youth that is secured and off-limits to participants outside of the council. Access and use of the space becomes a benefit of youth council participation.

Plan and budget for face-to-face meetings. Text messages are a preferred method to contact youth. Conference calls, emails, dedicated web sites, and social networking sites like Facebook are also effective ways to keep members connected between face-to-face meetings. Multiple and frequent messages, at least twice a week, should be used.

### Building Youth Capacity

Youth council coordinators should provide skill-building, leadership, advocacy, and volunteer training for youth members. Each meeting should include an activity that builds youth capacity, even if the activity is primarily social. Examples of these activities from successful youth councils are provided below.

**Skill Building:** Development and pilot programs to be used in the Youth Job Connection include job application proficiencies, resumé writing, interview skills, customer service training, habits of highly successful employees, job shadowing, career assessment, career exploration, career counseling, job market assessments, career fairs, networking events, entrepreneurial classes, and technology classes.

**Leadership:** Organizational development skills should include creating leadership roles and job descriptions, managing a successful meeting, communication skills, professional dress, table etiquette, technology etiquette, leadership styles, team building, mentoring, recruiting council membership, public speaking, managing organizational budgets, managing personal budgets, personal finance, and problem solving.

**Advocacy:** Advocacy activities include agency education, issues education, critical thinking, grass roots movements, civics education, lobbying strategies, tours of government buildings, attending government and public meetings, giving presentations at civic organizations, letter writing to newspapers and leaders, and giving presentations to agency volunteers and Boards are elements of advocacy.

**Volunteerism:** Volunteerism includes required community service hours or activities, volunteer training, reflections or discussions about the volunteer experience, pairing or mentoring by other Goodwill volunteers.

### Deepening Youth Motivation

The members of the youth council should be selected because they have skills and commitment. Young people should be afforded the opportunity to tackle the issues that they identify as most pressing in their families, schools, neighborhoods and broader communities. Connecting immediate issues to root causes is a critical process for adults and young people engaged in community change. Research also helps youth and adults deepen their knowledge about issues, understand root causes, appreciate alternative perspectives, and develop effective arguments and responses. Surveys are a popular

method of collecting youth voices and can be a quick way to garner the opinions of young people. Young people should help design the survey instrument and think through where, when, and how the survey will be administered.

Giving youth the space to create, coordinate, implement, measure, and evaluate their own work and the work of their peers will deepen commitment and motivation. The Positive Youth Development framework encourages working “with” youth, not “for” youth. This approach can often be frustrating for staff charged with accomplishing certain tasks or work. While the positive youth development approach may take longer to accomplish work, research indicates that youth leading youth is a strong predictor of success for youth organizations.

### Negotiating Opportunities for Access

The program should cultivate ownership and accountability in the council by creating shared leadership opportunities between youth council members and Goodwill leadership and community policy makers. In addition to allowing youth to be heard by leaders, youth councils can play an important role by helping ensure youth voices are heard by the public at large. To reach the general public, youth councils use typical media outreach strategies: writing letters to newspaper editors, holding press conferences, producing press releases, and using web sites to publicize their work.

## STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- Make personal and written contact with potentially interested youth. These teens and young adults can serve as a core team to organize the council.
- Hold an organizing event or information session.
- At this event, distribute applications to gather personal information and assess interest.
- Hold an organizing meeting within a month of the information session, using a core team to attract a larger, monthly youth council.

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