

***Meaningfully Engaging Young People:
Principles, Strategies, and Success Stories***

September 18, 2024

Webinar Transcript

Dr. Stephanie McGencey: Good afternoon, and welcome to Meaningful Youth Engagement: Principles, Strategies, and Success Stories, a webinar presented by the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs chaired by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

My name is Stephanie McGencey. I'm the President and founder of the Women's Equity Center and Action Network, and a consultant to the Children's Defense Fund.

I am your moderator for this webinar, and I'm delighted that you chose to spend some of your afternoon with us.

"Nothing about us, without us" is a common phrase used to communicate the idea that no policy, program, or research effort should be undertaken without the full and direct engagement of those most affected by that policy, program, or research.

Young people are embracing this phrase and are working closely with adult allies to increase opportunities for them to engage meaningfully and contribute to research programs and policies that impact their daily lives.

Today, we're here to share principles, strategies, resources, and real-world examples you can deploy to engage youth and young adults authentically and meaningfully.

You will hear directly from three youth and young adult leaders with direct experience working in partnership with adult allies to improve youth outcomes across multiple programs and domains.

You'll hear first from Amanda Benton, who is the chair of the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs. After her remarks, I'll facilitate a discussion with our three speakers: Diamond Lewis, a program manager with the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Akshaya Aalla, who's the founder and president of It's Her Right, a national civic organization, civic engagement organization, rather, based in California, and Trace Terrell, Next Gen Advisor with the National Alliance for Mental Illness.

I encourage you to review their full bios which were shared in the webinar announcement. Because we only have an hour to discuss so many important topics related to youth engagement, please use the Q and A feature to ask your questions throughout the webinar, and I'll do my very best to make sure that we get to all your questions today.

I'd now like to turn it over to Amanda Benton for her remarks. Amanda.

Amanda Benton: Thank you so much, Dr. McGencey. So, as she said, my name is Amanda Benton, pronouns she/her, and I'm so glad to be here. I serve as chair of the federal

Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, and I'm just so excited you all have chosen to join us.

So, to kick us off I'm just going to share a little bit about the work that we are doing at the federal level. The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs was created back in 2008 by an executive order, and is comprised of 25 federal departments and agencies committed to improving youth outcomes.

One of our goals is to support and model youth engagement and young adult partnership in federal work. So, I'll talk about just a few of the ways that we do that. We really value engaging young people in our work, so we can improve outcomes by ensuring that federal funding, services, and all of our work really meets people's needs and improves their access to the services they need.

Next slide.

So, just to ground us, for the working group, we like to use this definition of meaningful youth engagement which comes from USAID's YouthPower Learning Community of Practice on Engagement.

Youth engagement is an inclusive, intentional, mutually respectful partnership between youth and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people's ideas, perspectives, skills, and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms and organizations that affect lives and their communities, countries and globally. Next slide.

So, my office has done quite a bit of work on youth engagement, and you will hear a lot more from the other speakers, who are sort of even more expert. But just to whet your appetite, I want to call out a subset some of the key youth engagement practices that came out of one particular project that we did a few years ago.

First, the importance of peer support, clear role and expectations for everyone involved, and training and support for both young people and adults. That includes proper training and prep for youth to participate as full partners and provide input on decision making.

I will also emphasize the value of not treating young people as a monolith, but understanding the range of developmental needs of youth of varying ages, the role that culture and background can have on how young adults perceive their power individually and as a group, and how they interact with adults around them, and an understanding of the complicated relationships that young people with system involvement may have with those systems.

And you'll hear this from other speakers, but I really want to highlight the importance of ensuring sufficient human and financial resources to do this work. That means having appropriate staffing levels and financial support to enable both youth and staff preparation and really enable mission success. Next slide.

I'm gonna briefly touch on Youth Engaged 4 Change, engage.youth.gov, or YE4C, which is an extension of youth.gov, and it is aimed at adolescents and young adults. It's got resources for youth, it's got first-hand accounts of youth leaders serving as changemakers and promoting meaningful partnerships with adults, and opportunities to get engaged through fellowships, volunteering, things like that.

The YE4C platform has engaged youth in a number of ways, including through an editorial board consisting of up to 12 young people with diverse lived experiences. Editorial Board members support the work of the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs and they create content for YE4C website and social media.

So, this has included things like creating content for young people by young people like podcasts on navigating healthcare as a young person. We did a blog post recently on gender-based violence hotlines that you can call right now. Careers in public health. We've done inspiring stories on shedding a light on invisible, invisible disabilities, and a lot more.

Past members have also participated in the new Recruitment and Selection Committee to help select a new cohort of young people. Young people have participated in helping to shape content for key federal resources and much more. Next slide.

So, just in addition to the work mentioned earlier, I will very briefly highlight a very small sample of other resources from working group member agencies on engaging young people and others with lived experience. My office at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or HHS has released a variety of resources, including an infographic that defines lived experience, briefs on identification, recruitment, and engagement of folks, and more. The HHS Administration for Children and Families has produced a lot as well, including webinars, a tool with strategies along a continuum of involvement from case level engagement all the way up to participation in systems-level decision making. There's a blueprint that aims to build organizational capacity in areas like viewing young people's organizational assets, having the right people, implementing flexible and innovative programs and practices, and using science and technology effectively. Next slide.

The HHS Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration released guidelines to encouraging organizations applying for grants to involve those with lived experience in the proposal development implementation review of those grants.

The last thing I'll just briefly highlight is USAID has some resources that highlight approaches and action oriented recommendations to renew the commitment to working closely with young people as partners in development, and they've got some information on measurement indicators and evaluation more, I would encourage you to check it out.

Next slide. So, with no further ado, I would just like to thank you all for taking the time out of your day to hear from our very impressive line-up of speakers. I will now turn it back to Dr. McGencey and to go over some of these engagement principles, fundamental practices, and some helpful tools and resources. Thank you all so much.

Stephanie McGencey: Thank you very much. Before we begin. I wanted to briefly share the operating system that powers the Children's Defense Fund's youth engagement strategy. Next slide, please.

CDF has a, I'm sorry, go back, please. I apologize. Thank you. Stay there with me for a second. CDF has adopted four youth engagement principles, as shown on the slide:

Honoring and uplifting young people as experts with unique contributions to inform our efforts.

We believe that as adult allies we must be trustworthy, transparent, accountable, and reliable in our dealings with young people.

We hold a safe space for youth as experts and aim to build a new power dynamic that centers and amplifies their expertise.

These principles informed our selection of a model to operationalize our principles. Next slide, please.

Several models, frameworks, and tools are available to inform your agency's youth engagement policies and practices. Here are just three common evidence-based models in work in use today.

It is critical that you take the time to research models of youth engagement and select the one that works best for your organization and that will help you to achieve your goals.

We'll share this slide deck with you later, because those QR codes and hyperlinks are to the original research behind the three different models. Next slide, please.

CDF selected Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation.

As you can see, it has eight rungs ranging from manipulation, rung number one, to youth-initiated shared decisions with adults, rung number eight.

It is also important to note a real big pause to note that youth engagement is a dynamic, context-sensitive undertaking, unique to your organization.

Like many organizations, CDF has experienced movement up and down Hart's Ladder while engaged in specific projects and during different times, as we've explored our strategy and our impact. And I think you can expect the same.

It is a learning journey that we are on, and we're really excited that a number of young people have agreed to go along this learning journey with us.

Next slide, please.

Here we see Harry Shier's pathways to participation. Another model illustrating the dynamic nature of youth engagement, so you can start here and work your way up the model and have

times where you're likely going to be working further behind where you thought you had been before.

Next slide.

And in this slide we see Delgado and Staples' combined model, which has elements of Hart's ladder and of pathways to participation. And again we'll share the slide deck so that you can have access to the original research.

Next slide.

When preparing for today, we spoke with our speakers, and they identified several fundamental practices for youth engagement.

This list is certainly not exhaustive, so we offer it for discussion today and in the future, when you're talking in your organizations about how you're going to implement youth engagement. So, securing buy-in from leaders with decision-making authority, providing an opportunity to participate throughout the life cycle of a project or initiative.

Providing access to resources like books and peer support. Next slide.

And maintaining regular contact. Think very high-touch relationship building and activating your network to support the development of young people.

Next slide, please.

We'll talk about this one a little bit later, and we'll come back to it if we can.

Let's get to the heart of the matter.

Hearing from our expert speakers on how to secure buy-in, the importance of training and TA, the ability to meet in-person, flexible scheduling, etc.

I firmly believe in beginning with the high point moment. So, as our speakers come on the screen and we can pause our slide deck, for now.

I asked our speakers to share an experience of meaningful, authentic youth engagement focusing on one of the fundamental practices they identified, which is leader buy-in.

Our speaker stated that having leaders who can allocate resources and make decisions on where to position young people in meaningful roles is an important key to success.

I'd like to start with Trace.

Trace, can you share your experience working with the Center for Law and Social Policy? Their youth policy team.

How did CLASP leadership make the experience meaningful for you?

Trace Terrell: Thank you for your question, Dr. McGencey. I was very fortunate in 2023 to be able to participate in the first ever Transition Age Youth Policy Summit through the Center for Law and Social Policy's Youth Policy Team, the Utah Office of Substance Use and Mental Health and NAMI Utah. And the basic concept of the event was to bring together five young people from across the country to use their lived expertise to evaluate state and federal policies affecting the mental and behavioral health of transition-aged young people, and some key elements of this experience included the compensated training and onboarding that we received before the event. For many of our panelists, we were unfamiliar with the policy landscape, and so providing both funding for that and also practical skills and knowledge that we could use to make technical recommendations later was incredible.

We also received room and board for the in-person events. I know in this conversation virtual opportunities get a lot of airtime. But the impact that in-person events can have on a young person's development, both as a student, as a professional is incredible.

Another key component was the professional photography that we received. I was able to get some of my first professional head shots which were something that I still use today. So, those are very helpful when a young person is trying to enter the workforce and stay in there as well. We were also able to, during the event itself, say our feedback in a way where we were the only ones doing so. I think sometimes we have these youth-led conferences, and it can be overtaken by adults. But in this one, we were able to share what we wanted, how we wanted, and it was absolutely incredible. And the final kind of key element of the experience was co-writing a publication about the event.

That was my first ever sort of formalized article about something like this. So, I was so appreciative for that opportunity.

And to end, I think a theme that we really want to emphasize throughout this webinar is the importance of follow-up involvement. So, after the events, one of our panelists was able to join the Board of Directors of one of the hosting organizations, an incredible success.

Two other panelists and I had the opportunity to be flown out to this year's conference to give keynote presentations on our work since then, in terms of our academic endeavors or our professional work as well, and we all still maintain active touch with each other. Those high points, high acuity conversations are very, very important.

Stephanie McGencey: Wow! Great. Thank you so much for sharing that example, Trace. Diamond, you have a similar example in terms of the immediate impact that young people are having in curating content for OJJDP's upcoming National Conference. What was the impetus behind the Youth Subcommittee? And how is the OJJDP leadership supporting that group of young people?

Diamond Lewis: Thank you so much, Stephanie. So, you're right. We're having pretty great success, I would say, with having the subcommittee curate sessions for our National

Conference right now. So, basically, this idea was birthed actually, from young people that brought a call to action to us at our last OJJDP National Conference, just letting us know basically that they wanted to be more involved in the decision-making process as it came to our national conferences, right, so.

We implemented the OJJDP youth and family partnerships working group from this idea, and there we kind of branched off into different subcommittees, one of those subcommittees being the National Conference. Since then, we have had a group of young adults from across the country that have participated in monthly meetings since last November. The Conference will be held in D.C. this November, so we're almost to the finish line, but they have been working tirelessly from start to finish. Initially, you know, the meetings were just about what they wanted to see at the conference right how to make it more inclusive.

And right now we have gotten a total of six youth sessions that's gonna be part of a cultivating emerging leaders track that has been completely curated by them. We have a youth networking event, a couple of them actually, that have been completely curated by the youth as well, and so I think it just goes back to what you were saying, Stephanie, about bringing them in at the at the very beginning of the decision-making processes. And so, we brought them in as consultants, right, with our training and technical assistance providers. And so, we've been paying them. They do not join any meetings without compensation. Every single meeting that we've had with every speaker they've been on. Right now, we're working on developing the PowerPoints. They are very hands on with that.

And so basically, it just boils down to there are no decisions that are made in this process without them, right? Specifically for those youth track sessions, those are for them. Right? So, like you said, by us for us. So, you know, we try to operate with the notion that those closest to the ground are often closest to the solutions. And so, you know, it's it's not up to us people without lived experience to determine what it is that they want to see or hear or need and so, we've let them, we've let them just kind of take the reins, and it's been an amazing experience. It's been very rewarding for myself and OJJDP, to be able to to work with them. They have amazing ideas in everything they do and they've been very dedicated, as dedicated as any expert that we've ever worked with. So, it's been an amazing experience.

Stephanie McGencey: Wow! What a great testament to the power of involving young people like you said from the beginning all the way through to the culmination of the project which will be the conference. Akshaya has another take on how important — another important way, rather — that leaders can demonstrate their buy-in and engagement. Can you talk about, Akshaya, how important it is for leaders to open up their networks and to mentor and otherwise show support for young leaders?

Akshaya Aalla: Yeah, of course. So, I've always noticed that when receiving support from adult allies and just people in the education space in general, they're often able to often me as a high schooler who's a minor and underage, often unable to receive the same opportunities as other youth or other people in the same spaces. I was able to receive kind of mentorship and the opportunity for my platform to be elevated. So, an actual example I can think of this is when I

first started my initiative, It's Her Right, I was actually able to receive a lot of support from our moderator, Dr. Stephanie McGencey, and she was able to help offer me mentorship and help me navigate legal and policy frameworks and just the education policy field and then also just advocacy without like overstepping and allowing me to really blossom in my initial role.

And then ultimately, like leading to the success of our initiative, even though she was able to stay behind the scenes and kind of back me and empower me and be able to blend my passion for the project with her expertise and her resources, she was able to make me feel confident enough to succeed in this role. And then she was able to, through that, like facilitate connections with other activists, facilitate collaborations with other organizations, and just overall provide resources that are typically beyond reach for me. And so, being able to offer resources to youth who wouldn't otherwise have that opportunity is extremely valuable, and really helps youth foster in a space that they wouldn't otherwise have access to.

Stephanie McGencey: I did not pay for that, but thank you so much, and I wish my mother could hear it all and know what it is that I'm trying to do every day in terms of working very closely with dynamic leaders such as yourself, Akshaya. The feelings are all mutual. I learn from you every time we have a conversation or working on a project.

We asked adult allies how to, what their concerns were, and one of them was how to be prepared to engage with young people. You all had a lot of thoughts about what young, about what adult allies, rather, need to do to prepare to deeply engage with you. You were clear that you want to be engaged in the type of meaningful efforts that have been described just now. Not just administrative tasks, like doing social media and technology, which seems to often be a default when we think about engaging young people.

You all were also very clear about being involved in an initiative's entire life cycle, not just as a rubber stamp at the end. So, can you share a little bit more in terms of detailed recommendations? What kind of strategies, activities should adult allies be doing to prepare for working with, deeply, with young people, and how they know that they're doing a good job? And Diamond, I'd like to start with you on this question. You spoke about the role of young people in the federal peer review process at OJJDP. How did this come about, and how have you modified your grant process to really and truly operationalize meaningful youth engagement?

Diamond Lewis: All right, thanks, Stephanie, and I'll start off this question by saying that we are still in the process of modifying, you know, our grant processes to make sure that it's meaningful for youth. But again, this idea birthed from that last call to action that our youth gave. I'll start off by saying that call to action that they gave at that conference last year, it kind of transitioned very quickly into a Youth Call to Action Group that was having meetings with our administrator, Liz Ryan, monthly. Right, so, one of the things that they said that they wanted to do was be involved in our peer review process. And so what that looks like is basically, I mean, they're onboarded just like any other peer reviewer.

But you know we send out invitations directly to our young adult networks, right? Just to see, you know, gauge interest and then we have our, you know, our peer review team onboard them

just like just like anyone else, honestly. But of course, we engage in training with them as to how to navigate the database, what they should be looking for as a peer reviewer and things like that. And so we have special contractors and special peer review staff that work with those young adults in order to get that done.

But so like you, as you were saying, you know, just kind of bringing them in throughout the entire life cycle of the process. You know, we wanted them to not only have a say, you know, after funding had been recommended right? Because OJJDP, we're a grant making agency. So we wanted them to actually have a say in what programs and what entities were actually receiving this funding. Right? So, and now, OJJDP has implemented something where we actually make sure that any grantee or cooperative agreement that we grant funding to actually have youth and family partnership language in their solicitation, in their programs, and their program narratives. If they're coming to us, we have to ensure that they actually have a solidified plan for what they plan to do with engaging youth. And so with that, we've been able to, you know, update the youth on that. They've been very excited to hear that we were able to implement that. And so, we've been able to engage them throughout the whole peer review and grant making process in this way.

And so, it's been. It's been we've gotten good feedback from it. There have been some lessons learned right? Because peer reviewing is very strenuous. It is very time consuming and so, being able to work around the young people's schedules, and everything like that is something that we are, you know, working on right now. Just trying to figure out how to keep them engaged throughout the process. Like I said, it's very long. It's a months-long, you know, process and so being able to, you know, keep them interested and engaged has been something that we're trying to work on. We've been texting them for feedback on the peer review process. So, we've been trying to meet the young people where they are essentially in terms of getting feedback for that. So, it's been working out quite well so far.

Stephanie McGencey: Absolutely great, using all the tools at our disposal, right, to maintain the connections.

Trace, you spoke about testifying before the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance and meeting legislative staff later, and them articulating to you the importance of your impact, and what you said.

How did that experience demonstrate for you what it's like when you have receptive adult allies in your role?

Trace Terrell: This is a wonderful question, and I think what stood out to me most was the fact that they said we wanted to meet you where you were at, and then they actually did so. So, I want to emphasize here that it is a continuum, and that you have to take it from acknowledging that this needs to happen, and then actually making it happen. And I think the first point of that is to really center in on the intention, right. When I was first approached by the legislative staff, they were very open to hearing about my lived expertise, which honestly was new to them, and

sometimes at odds with what they had initially expected. And so, what really worked in that conversation was them being open to hearing what I had to say, and not judging

anything that came out of that conversation, but then a commitment to working together to ensure that we both shared messages that felt authentic, that felt real, and that felt actionable too.

I was also very impressed by the fact that they approached me, and I think youth engagement at large, based on, like a genuine interest in what I was doing in my subject matter expertise, in my field of interest, and in my study. I think we should never assume that young people are monoliths that can speak to every issue affecting young people, and what really stood out to me is that they reached out directly to speak about my experience volunteering on the teen to teen suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline in high school and nothing else. That was something that I felt very comfortable speaking about, and so it was really nice to be kind of recognized as that expert in the field.

And I think the third bullet here is that it was really amazing, because they went out of their way to actively search for a young person, and they didn't just wait for them to appear, right. It should never be the case that we give opportunities and engagements to young people who might be quote unquote, "easily available" because of their high achievements or past accomplishments, and those are the ones that are always represented in the field, or always selected for these sorts of engagements. I think we should value a range of experiences and recognize that local community organizing is an equal measure to state or federal work as a young person, and when I was approached it mattered really deeply, because I was from a small rural town of about 3,000 people, where opportunities like that simply did not exist. And so to be approached, to have this opportunity truly did change the trajectory of my life.

And I think the second part of that, right, when we're talking about operationalizing what it means to meet a young person where they're at, it means following up as well.

After I started college, I was actually able to connect with one of the legislative staff who helped plan the event, and she said that my testimony had actually helped garner some of the bipartisan support needed to pass some of the mental health provisions in the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which, hearing that a year later, felt incredible, honestly. It's probably one of the most valuable experiences that I've ever had in my life, and as a result, I wanted to maintain that relationship with the office as well. So, I met with my Senator multiple times since then, and we have a very strong relationship. We have many pictures together, which I'm so thankful for. And I'm actually hoping this upcoming summer to intern on Capitol Hill in his office. So, my piece of advice, and what I would want anyone to leave with today is to just simply think about the continuum or the life cycle of the engagement or experience, right. As a result of this young person participating, what is it that they should get immediately? And what is it that you hope they are able to demonstrate years down the road. And then writing that down, clearly stating it, and especially articulating it to the young person, so that they know as well.

Stephanie McGencey: Wow, you've heard to our audience two examples of engagement in both policy making, improving programming, and how research is applied in both instances at the federal level. Akshaya, can you share a little bit more about your experience at a county level working with your Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission?

Akshaya Aalla: Yeah, of course. So, I, in Placer County, which is where I live, I work as a youth commissioner, one of two, on our Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission. And so during my time there, I was able to witness firsthand how our youth involvement was able to positively impact the program and eventually the outcomes of the program. So, as a young person who was able to interact with the other youth within the facility, I was able to notice that they were a lot more receptive to work with someone that they were able to see as a peer and someone that they trusted and saw as a friend, and then, therefore, they were more willing to provide perspectives that adults may not have previously considered, or may not have been able to hear from them just because they didn't feel like they were in a safe space.

And so by being able to involve youth in the space it was able to lead to the development of more effective and responsive programs. And the input that us as youth commissioners were able to offer helped shape the services that were more relevant to the actual needs of the young people in the facility rather than what the adults were able to perceive as most accurate in order to represent them.

And then this was overall able to result in improved engagement, and then overall success rates among the youth in terms of them feeling like they were met where they needed to be. And so youth participation within the facility and the programs was also increased, and transparency and trust between the youth and the Commission, and then also the adults, was able to help the youth in the facility feel like they were represented and seen after all of these changes.

And so basically, as a youth, as a young person within the space, being able to utilize our voice in a way that's able to help other young people, specifically in this space where they weren't really feeling like they were represented accurately and safe beforehand, to when youth were able to be involved, and then, more accurately represented, was really an eye-opening experience, and something that made me realize that we should really try to get youth involved in spaces where youth are being targeted. Just because providing a youth perspective when you are trying to target youth. So, for example, if you are trying to start an initiative that youth would be required to do something, make sure that you're also gaining the youth perspective on that, because of a lot of times, being disconnected, you may not always consider all of the like different programs that could emerge from that. And so, just making sure that by including a youth perspective, you will be able to consider all of the different ramifications of the initiative that you're starting.

Stephanie McGencey: What's the phrase? People support what they help to create, right? And you all are speaking about a direct line of sight you have into young people's experiences with different programs, policies, and how research is integrated and infused, and all of that. I promised that we would have time for questions and answers, and I already see a few questions coming up in the Q&A box. So, now would be a really good time for you to drop your question in

the box. I have one final question, and then we'll go to some of the questions that are there, and it's about a big issue. And one of the questions that's been asked already is around compensation, right?

It generated a lot of discussion on our prep call. We've had some deep discussions about it at the Children's Defense Fund and other organizations.

And I want to highlight that here and there was a slide. I don't know if we can pull it up quickly, that calls out compensation and what some of the experiences our speakers have had that they're going to talk to in just a second. So, considering pay equity, paying young people and adults equitably, as in the same, start with offering cash rather than gift cards, these are some of the things that we have heard are happening, or some of the challenges as well, providing support for young people who are unbanked, so that onboarding includes some financial literacy.

We're going to talk about the pay scale ranging widely from offering no compensation to minimum wage, \$50 or more, you know a monthly stipend, all depending upon the scope of work that young people are being invited to engage in, the constraints that the organization may have, like wanting to engage young people, but not having included that in the original project budget, where do you generate, or how do you gain resources to be able to do that? Let's dig into that for a second.

And Akshaya, I want to start with you because you talked about being a part of this Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission. And can you share a little bit how, to say the least, compensation was uneven — for the young people and the adults participating in that important effort?

Akshaya Aalla: Yeah, of course. So, our commission is made up of 12 people. So, 10 adults and two youth, and the adults are compensated for their role on the commission; however, the youth are not. And just to kind of put into perspective kind of why this matters in this space, part of our role as being part of the commission, is going around to all of the facilities within our county and evaluating them, doing interviews, doing a lot of prep work beforehand. So, there's a lot of work that goes into being part of this commission. And that does take away time from especially youth who like, for example, myself, I'm in high school. So, especially as a senior in high school, I still have a lot of things going on - sports, college applications, etc. So, it does take up a lot a lot of my time. And so to not be able to be compensated for that time, it's just really inconvenient for me.

And then, so, when youth and young people in general are expected to volunteer their time to an organization, first it should be very clearly stated when you are advertising that role, that it will or will not be compensated. But the practice that where the practice of having compensation for the adults of the Commission, but not the youth, just really severely undervalues the contributions that the youth are making to the initiative in the program and it just really fails to recognize their work as equally important as the adults, and so paying these adults, but not the young people kind of sends that message that youth input is less valuable, and it makes us feel

like we are not creating valuable contributions to the space, which, as we can tell through this call so far, is not true. And so, it can really just discourage engagement. And then overall reduce the effectiveness of youth and adult partnerships.

And so, it's very crucial that you're able to address this imbalance if you have it already within your initiatives or programs or organizations to try to foster an equitable environment that respects and values all contributions.

And so, when it comes to compensation specifically, I've seen this in my other spaces as well. A lot of times gift cards are used as a way to pay youth, so I've received Doordash gift cards, Amazon Gift cards, Starbucks gift cards, and a \$50 Starbucks gift card is not really beneficial to me as someone who's trying to save up for college. So, being able to receive compensation in a way that's really beneficial for the youth, and not just something that you're doing to tick off a box is really helpful.

And then another thing is stipends, and stipends are a really good way to try to at first address this problem. But making sure that your stipends are flexible because receiving a \$500 stipend later, when all of my like financial aid stuff is due, is not as beneficial as receiving it earlier in the process. So, making sure that when you are providing stipends, and you are providing funds, that you're able to be flexible with the youth and meet them where they need to be met.

Stephanie McGencey: Great. Thank you so much for sharing what your experience has been. I want to go to Trace now, because you have a similar experience to Akshaya, and then Diamond we'll come back to you to talk about how OJJDP is managing compensation for the young people you're working with. Trace?

Trace Terrell: I will say that I have been very fortunate to have had more paid positions than unpaid throughout my career. And currently, as a Next Gen Advisor for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, I receive \$20 an hour for up to 10 hours a week. That's deposited directly into my bank account, and it really has helped to eliminate the need for my federal work study in college, so participating in this has truly helped me still pursue an area that I'm very interested in, but be able to pay the bills on the back end that I need to take care of in order to show up for school to show up, you know, for all the other obligations that I have.

I will say that if there's one thing that has led me to participate in these events, it's compensation, right? It's really closed that sort of opportunity gap that I never really thought I would be able to kind of close, I guess, is a better way to describe it. It's really helped me again, like I said, not have a part- or full-time job while in high school or in college, to again navigate rent, groceries, and school supplies, and I truly think that compensation has helped me share my lived experience, and lived expertise with the world. Without it I don't think I would be in the field that I am now, I don't think I would have the opportunity to testify before Congress or anything like that. So, to just level set, it is very important to young people, and it is very transformative to their lives.

If I had to provide advice or kind of key takeaways, I would say, like Akshaya said, gift cards are not a substitute for paid compensation. In my experience I've actually received gift cards that I actually couldn't redeem. I received a Doordash gift card. And let me tell you, my town just got Doordash literally like three months ago. We have one store on it. So, that very really wasn't helpful for me, and I wasn't able to ultimately use it. And I think it sounds simple, but it's really important to look at community contacts, especially when working with rural youth who again, might need more alternative methods of compensation as well.

I also think it's important to take a look at pay schedules for young people, stipends at the beginning or at the end of an engagement, can sometimes make it hard to cover all the in between expenses. And so, thinking about, how can we create a pay schedule that actually works for the young people who are using it?

And I also, in another way. I think it's important to be transparent about when a stipend or a token of appreciation will be offered. I've signed up for some events and really enjoy participating in them, and then been offered a token of appreciation afterward. And that was incredible, amazing, and I loved it. But I didn't really know how to articulate the experience then to others, when I initially signed up thinking it was a volunteer experience, and then I'm not sure now, if this kind of qualifies as something other. So, I think, being very transparent from the start, if that is something to be offered, is very helpful for young people as well. And like I mentioned earlier in my experience with the Transition Age Youth Policy Summit, onboarding and training should be compensated.

I think that's just a standard right? That happens all the time for adults who are entering the job market. So, making that and extending the same to young people is absolutely huge. And my final point is just that young people still deserve paid leave. If they're in a contract or part time position. It is so important. They are often serving as caretakers to their siblings, to their family members, to things like that, and offering the ability for young people to accrue that time while still being engaged in the work, I think, will ultimately help them you know, develop skills that are actually relatable to the real labor market that's out there right? But also help them stay involved continuously.

Stephanie McGencey: Trace and Akshaya, thank you for giving very concrete examples of how to manage compensation. Diamond, one of the questions that we have is how do you manage this logistically, especially with the challenges of federal funding? So as a federal agency, you can certainly speak to that. And there was a related question about compensation. I'm losing it now. I think it has something to do with hiring, like announcing the position, right? And how do you even recruit for young people that you'd like to work with? Why don't you speak to that quickly?

Diamond Lewis: Sure, and I'll say this again. So, this is something that we are currently working on at OJJDP. I mean one thing that we know for sure is that we'll never be bringing in a youth without compensation. I think the piece right now is just how much. We've got, we've wavered on that quite a bit. So, we're in the process of finalizing our youth compensation policy. And that's something that I'll say is one of the first steps that that should probably be taken if you

know you're going to undertake this work, is there needs to be a budget right for compensation, for travel, for different things.

Right now we operate on the federal government consultant rate, because that's what the youth are. They are consultants. They are experts in what they are doing, and you know we get pushback on that sometimes. However, we forget that the lived experience isn't just coming from being system impacted right? A lot of these young people have degrees. They have started their own companies. They've started their own businesses. They are volunteering other places. So, they really do have the experience that we're paying our other consultants.

So, at OJJDP we do not bring them on to OJJDP, like so we don't have them competing federally for a position. What we do is we contract them, contract them through our training and technical assistance providers. Right? So, American Institutes for Research is a really great one. They have youth consultants. So, when we birth our youth and family partnership group we bought in youth consultants to even tell us what that working group should look like to birth all of these other programs that we have going on right.

All that's happening through our technical and training assistance providers. And so we've been paying them, most of the time, if they're getting sent out to a conference, we're asking them to speak, or something like that, asking them to share their experience, we're paying them the consultant rate of \$650 a day. The only exception to that that we have right now is the conference because we have about 200 youth coming that we're paying for airfare, lodging, per diem, and meals.

And so we have, you know, we have to we have to budget a little bit. And so the youth that will be participating in this conference we'll be paying 25 an hour. But then, you know, we've also established that just because we're paying them at the lower rate does not mean that there are not also other things that we can, that can be considered compensation right?

So we're giving them padfolios for them to take with them, you know, just as a as a way for to let them know that we are taking them seriously as professionals in this space. Right? They're getting free head shots. So, anyone that doesn't have a head shot can come in and get their picture taken, and they'll be able to take that home with them. We're giving them training on how to get business cards and things like that. So, we have a lot of other things on top of, if you're going to be paying them at the lower rate, we never substitute money. Ever. Right, these are young people, many of them over 18. They have families, they many of them are not living with their families. Right? They're on their own, have been for quite some time, and we understand that. And a lot of times when we're pulling people in for like these conferences and things, they are grantees, or they're already funded in other ways. It's their jobs, right? So their jobs are already paying them. So, it's important for us to make sure that that the youth feel compensated as well, but I just think so. We never, ever substitute money for anything. But I think if we just have come to the conclusion that if it's going to be on the lower rate because of budgeting issues, there are other ways that we can compensate youth to let them know that we take them seriously as experts.

Stephanie McGencey: Excellent. And there are two questions that are in the chat that I want to combine because it speaks to the issue of compensation, sort of in an indirect way, which is, how do we ensure that we're engaging as many diverse voices as possible in youth engagement efforts, and that ability to, you know, travel or spend time, or, you know, get to a place and or not being able to substitute paid work for a youth engagement opportunity, because, you know, I just need money to take care of myself and my family. So, as a fairness and equity and equal opportunity kind of thing, what do you recommend that agencies and organizations do to actively recruit a diverse group of young people: age, gender, socioeconomic status, all the things? How can we reach you? How do we find you?

Let's start with you, Trace.

Trace Terrell: This is a great question, and I think it might parallel a little bit to some of my initial responses, where I think it's super important to not always pick the youth that are most easily accessible or easily available. Right? And what I mean by that is the youth that already have the resources to travel, to miss school, to take time off from their positions or things like that, right. I think, on a on a beginner level, it's acknowledging that some youth, for that is simply just, not a possibility. And to recognize that again, experience at the local level is just as valid as experience at the state or federal level. And so I think we should very much value and consider diverse forms of experience as valuable to the process, because, of course, like young people, know the issues that affect them, whether or not they have the ability to to articulate them in a public forum like this, or elsewhere, right? So being very upfront about that being very intentional about that in the application process as well, saying a statement that says something like we consider and value diverse forms of experience, including, but not limited to right, including, but not limited to. How do we kind of engage that entire spectrum.

One organization that I was a part of actually held like a listening session for the application. And they did talk briefly about just some of the different things that you know we're considering the like were considered as like valuable work experiences for something like that. And of course everything was. So, just being very flexible with young people, with the sorts of engagements that they're already involved in, and things like that is so helpful.

Stephanie McGencey: Akshaya, can you speak specifically about one of the questions from the in the Q&A box was about young people who are underage. Right? So, as you started doing this work when you were a sophomore, junior, and now a senior, how have the organizations that you've been working with engaged you, given that you are underage.

Akshaya Aalla: Yeah, of course. So, most of the organizations that I do work with target high school students. So, they are already well equipped to handle kind of having high school students within their spaces.

So, when it comes to handling like minors, in terms of the question in the chat box, managing consent. So, for most of the travel that I have to do there's always an adult advisor on site that is equipped to handle having minors on site, and then at the beginning of each of my term, my

parents have to sign off on a waiver that they're okay with me traveling, okay with me driving with other people, and then okay with me being like, alone in a hotel or something like that.

Because a lot of times they will sponsor me to attend conferences, and so then I have to go fly out to a hotel in San Diego, and then stay in a room by myself. And so even though it's very important to have youth spaces, or spaces where youth are prioritized, making sure that you're prioritizing the safety of the youth as well, and so making sure that you're getting consent from parents, and then also that you are being able to sponsor them in rooms that are safe for them to be in. In terms of kind of having like consent in payment, paying them, even though they are under age, they're probably still living with their parents. A lot of times, youth and minors specifically still have jobs, as I'm sure most of you know. And so a lot of times participating in these programs is taking away time from those jobs is still making sure that even though they're minors, even though they're probably still funded by their parents, that you're still compensating them because they do most youth are still trying to save up, to move out or trying to save up for something. So, even though not diminishing their value just because they're underage.

Stephanie McGencey: Thank you for that. And I'd like to take a little moderator privilege because we have four minutes and there are way more questions that I'd like to get to. But I think the final question that I have for the speakers will answer one of the questions about creating the opportunity for young people to engage and managing conflict between ideas of adult allies and the young people, and I asked our speakers to consider in our planning call their answer to the 'So what do I do now?' question, right? You've heard examples around compensation. You've heard different kinds of ways that young people have been meaningfully engaged. So, I want them to leave you with very quickly in the three minutes that we have left a first step for those of you that are new to working with young people, and a next step for those of you that have been working with young people so far, but are looking for perhaps what you might do next to move your work a little further. And Akshaya, I'd like to start with you if that's okay.

First step, next step.

Akshaya Aalla: Yeah, of course. So, I think your first step when starting a program that wants to value these contributions is making sure that you are well equipped to handle so, and so assessing your organization's readiness and ability to engage with youth and young adults. So, utilizing tools, such as a readiness assessment for your staff, or just measuring staff attitudes towards youth, and then making sure you have the available resources to support youth engagement like we've talked about so far with the compensation, and then also just making sure when it comes to your advertising that you're reaching diverse spaces and not just advertising through social media or through like newspapers or something, but making sure that you are trying to reach as many spaces as possible.

And then just gathering feedback from young people themselves before you begin. So, making sure you are able to understand how the youth would be able to contribute within your space. And then, if you are already within the space, so, perhaps a next step for you could be to again, like I mentioned just now, with the readiness, and then making sure that your staff attitudes

towards youth are positive and then maybe investing in staff training or training to make sure that everyone within your space is able to value the youth contributions that are being put forward.

Stephanie McGencey: Thank you. Trace, how about your first step, next step?

Trace Terrell: My first step would be to create a list of learning objectives and desired outcomes for a young person in a possible engagement, and to codesign that with the young person as well. Have the young person in that conversation thinking about, 'what do I actually want to get out of this?' My next step for people actually involved in the work is to present on your youth engagement to your colleagues or your team like Akshaya said, not only to just celebrate your incredible work, but to be an ally to young people, not just when it's a benefit to your work or to your position.

Stephanie McGencey: Wonderful, and Diamond your first step, next step.

Diamond Lewis: Thanks, Stephanie. So, first step I'll go with is to assess yourself. Right, like using the Hart's Ladder that we spoke about earlier. And while you're assessing yourself, you bring in a youth consultant to help assess as well cause, you know, we may be biased about our own agencies and organizations, and not really understanding where we fit on that ladder. So, I'd say, bringing young people to help you assess, and you assess yourself. And then you move from there. The next step from there, in my opinion, would be training yourselves, and by that I mean research. I mean bringing in youth consultants. OJJDP right now partners with Youth Move National and they train us on, you know, the different languages to use when we're speaking with young people and different things like that. So, once you're done assessing yourself, you can bring in those trainers, those youth consultants, that can make sure that you're being inclusive in everything that you do, and then you can move forward with, you know, staffing, budgeting, and things like that.

Stephanie McGencey: Wonderful. Well, as I said at the beginning, the hour went by super super fast.

Thank you for spending some of your afternoon with us. There will be a follow up to this webinar. Follow up in terms of there's some questions in the chat that we didn't have an opportunity to answer. There's some other resources that I think we're going to be able to call up and add to respond to your questions. Look for the follow up email from the Interagency Working Group. Thank you to our panelists, a round of applause, and have a great rest of the afternoon to all of you who came in today. Thank you.