

# Empowering Justice-Involved Youth

## Youth Justice Leadership Institute Practitioner's Guide



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## Acknowledgements

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This guide was created by a dedicated group of alumni of NJJN's [Youth Justice Leadership Institute](#) (YJLI). The Institute's mission is to clear a broad path for people of color to lead us toward justice system reform. NJJN elevates the leadership of people of color who know how to transform the oppressive systems harming communities of color.

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## Youth Justice Reform Requires Justice-Involved Youth Leaders

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**verb**

vərb/

*Noun*

**a word used to describe an action, state, or occurrence, and forming the main part of the predicate of a sentence, such as *hear, become, happen*.**

More than a decade ago, the National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN) published a report on the importance of developing youth leaders in the juvenile justice advocacy space. However, the field still has not fully answered this call. Largely across our community, the leadership and expertise of justice-involved youth remains untapped or is utilized in ways that are disempowering and mirror the exploitative systems that we, as advocates, are seeking to dismantle.

If we, as a community, do not center and empower justice-involved youth leaders, we will be left behind. Young people are leading and they are not waiting for others to make room for them.

Without justice-involved youth leaders, the systemic change within the juvenile justice system that advocates and organizations across the country are fighting for will not be sustained, nor will it have the impact needed to truly realize justice for youth, families, and marginalized communities.

This guide seeks to provide NJJN membership and the juvenile justice field broadly, with fundamental principles for developing directly-impacted youth leaders. These principles are reinforced by the practical tools provided in this guide for empowering, protecting, supporting, recruiting, and sustaining justice-involved youth leaders.

***em·pow·er***

əm 'pou(ə)r/

*Verb*

***To nurture and encourage the growth of inner strength and confidence, especially in someone controlling one's life and claiming one's rights.***

Empower is a verb. It is past time for our community to proactively and intentionally do this critically important work. The time is now.



## Principles of Justice-Involved Youth Leadership Development

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### Principle 1: Protect Justice-Involved Youth Leaders

*pro·tect*

*prəˈtekt/*

*Verb*

*keep safe from harm or injury.*

Providing protection to justice-involved youth leaders requires that the organization identify the ways in which it does or does not acknowledge, elevate, and support both the humanity and leadership of justice-involved youth leaders. Protecting youth leaders begins with protecting them from adult bias and power abuses within organizations. These abuses often manifest in the commodification of youth leaders. They become the organization’s “natural resource” to be controlled and managed. Protecting youth leaders requires consistent honoring of their autonomy as human beings. This is accomplished by building authentic, positive relationships.

This can be challenging for an organization, especially those unaccustomed to having youth be an active part of their advocacy.

Building positive relationships, of any kind, requires a level of self-reflection, transparency, and vulnerability that not all organizations currently have. A closed off and self-protective organizational culture will not elevate authentic relationships. Youth leaders in such cultures will be left to fend for themselves, with random allies at best, many of whom are outside of an organization. Finally, organizations and individuals partnering with justice-involved youth leaders must be fully knowledgeable about the jeopardy coming from the system itself (revocation of parole, gang registries, police harassment, stigma, etc.).

Adults must be willing to step up and stand up for youth at all times, in all circumstances and must dedicate resources (staff, money, connections) to defending youth leaders from system encroachment on their lives.

#### **Protection in Action: What does it look like to ‘protect’ youth leaders?**

Youth leaders control their story and their life.

Youth leaders do not have to share anything that makes them uncomfortable for any reason. In addition to empowering them to say no, we must also assist them in crafting their ‘no’ so that they are comfortable with it, if they need that help. Even if the adults in the organization can’t say no, the organization must ensure that the youth can. Adults also have a responsibility to make sure the youth understands how publicly sharing one’s story might impact the youth’s life.

Youth leaders are fully empowered and equipped to ask hard, disruptive questions related to advocacy, strategy, policy and organizational infrastructure. Ensure that young people know that their ideas, perspectives and recommendations are just as important as their stories. Youth leaders should be encouraged to challenge advocacy or strategy decisions that will not have the intended impact that is anticipated by policy advocates. Youth leaders are in the best position to hold policy advocates and agency decision makers accountable for unintended consequences that negatively impact youth and families.

Youth leaders deserve to exercise self-care and should be unequivocally supported in doing so. Adults have a responsibility to make sure youth are not overworked and stretched thin, even if they don't call attention to their own stress. Youth should be taught and encouraged to understand their limits, to set boundaries, and to take time to experience joy and fun. Instituting check-ins to make sure that adult supporters understand the various stressors in justice-involved youth's lives is necessary. To the extent possible, organizations should also make healing spaces and therapeutic services available to justice-involved youth.

## **Principle 2: Support Justice-Involved Youth Leaders**

*sup·port*

*sə'pôrt/*

*Verb*

*bear all or part of the weight of; hold up.*

The imperative to support youth leaders in the justice movement cannot be overvalued. Much like the imperative to protect, the commitment to support youth leaders must be rooted in honoring them as whole and complete human beings. As such, their material, emotional, professional, and personal needs must be centered as they engage in youth justice advocacy.

However, it may be that the existing culture of an organization does not center the well-being of employees or its adult participants. Such a culture will be unwelcoming to youth leaders and will be unable to provide supports that youth leaders most need.

Supporting youth leaders means resisting the urge to commodify them as if they were just a resource to be exploited by the organization. Youth leaders should be empowered to contribute to the overall movement for justice in the ways that they choose and not used as simply a value add to a single organization or advocacy campaign.

### **Support in action: What does it look like to support youth leaders?**

Youth leaders are encouraged to pursue their life goals and not just the organization's campaign goals whether those goals are related to youth justice work or not. What happens if and when a

youth leader no longer wants to do advocacy? Support and leadership development goes beyond the campaign and should include their broader interests.

A youth leader's skillset as an expert, leader, and advocate is actively built through structured professional development and educational opportunities. Establishing access to material supports beyond income (referrals, adequate medical coverage, personal development fees, etc.).

Youth leaders' basic needs are met and have the flexibility to adjust their role and involvement as their personal life dynamics begin to change. Youth leaders have concerns and lives above and beyond your organization and its work that take priority, especially when those concerns are related to their personal or family's well-being.

Youth leaders receive a holistic orientation to working in a policy advocacy environment. It is critical that organizations make sure they have the capacity to provide a holistic orientation and training for youth leaders. An office environment or policy advocacy environment could be a new experience for the youth leader, and therefore there should be an opportunity for that young person to adjust. Supervisors and mentors should set clear expectations regarding the youth leader's responsibilities, office dress code, and office conduct and provide with sufficient time for the young person to adjust. Youth leaders should be given an opportunity to shadow multiple colleagues over the first month of their position, so they can see different advocacy styles. Youth leaders should also have more than one mentor at the office that they can go to for support. In addition, the orientation should include a clear overview of the organization's grievance procedures and the youth's rights within the organization.

### **Principle 3: Recruit Justice-Involved Youth Leaders**

*re·cruit*

*rə 'kr ōot/*

*Verb*

*to strengthen or supply with new members.*

#### **Recruitment in action: What does it look like to recruit youth leaders?**

Youth leaders are the experts in identifying how the justice system works for and against their interests and success. Their positions within an organization should be professionalized in a way that recognizes their expertise in the same way that staff and consultants are recognized. As a result, youth leaders should be compensated for their contribution and time.

Youth leadership development and recruitment should involve relationships with a broad group of youth with varied experiences with the justice system. Gender, race, income, and the community that the young person is from impact the experience and expertise of a young person and therefore youth leaders should never be treated as generic representatives and

interchangeable. Incorporating the expertise of one individual directly impacted by the justice system is not sufficient representation.

Organizations must commit to having relationships with a broad group of youth in order to actually bring someone into the work. Too often organizations seek to engage youth as though it is a slave auction - you cannot just show up and say, 'I choose that one.' Organizations must be invested in long-term involvement and investment with the impacted youth in their community and be engaged with young people on a 'life level.'

Having a community outreach person is not enough - there must be a deep and profound relationship with as diverse a group of young people as possible. Frontline outreach workers should be from the community and they should be supported and valued within the organization. They should not be the lowest paid at your organization and their perspectives and outreach should be integrated into other aspects of the organization rather than siloed.

#### **Principle 4: Sustain Justice-Involved Youth Leaders**

*sus·tain*

*sə 'stān/*

*Verb*

*strengthen or support physically or mentally.*

Sustaining youth leaders is the most important part of any long-term vision of revolution or reform we might hold. Our ability to sustain our youth leaders will be the test of our commitment to their growth and development. Sustaining youth leaders goes beyond supporting their involvement in the “movement.” It is about supporting young leaders in developing the tools and the capacity to continue to move forward in their lives.

“It has been most important for CLIA to have a mindset of growth -- "if you're growing, you're in the right place." All of our youth leaders have come to our program in very different places and times in their lives -- some have IDs, and some do not; some have bank accounts and some do not; some have GEDs or high school diplomas and some do not; etc. No matter where the youth leaders are when they enter our program, no matter what strengths and weaknesses they may have, we always emphasize that if they're growing and making small improvements, we will work with them.” -- Sarah Wall, Community Law in Action

Sustaining youth leaders requires creativity, flexibility, and a long-term, authentic commitment to a young person's growth as an individual and as a leader. It requires us to be ready to support that young person in achieving their goals, even when those goals impact their involvement in the youth justice movement. It also requires us to always see the young person as a whole person, not simply as a survivor of the justice system.



Sustaining youth leaders also means continuing to think creatively about the structure of our organizations, so that they are conducive to hiring youth leaders as staff, building their capacity, and building our organization's capacity to effectively support those who may face the long-term collateral consequences of justice involvement. Ultimately, by putting our energy into sustaining youth leaders, we are creating a community of leaders who are healthier, more whole, and more powerful.

**Sustaining in action: What does it look like to sustain youth leaders?**

Youth leaders have the resources and the tools they need to achieve stability and care for themselves. Youth leaders who have experienced the justice system have often experienced interruptions in education, suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome and other consequences of early childhood trauma, and still face the challenges and responsibilities of young people impacted by poverty, racism, and other forms of systemic discrimination. Part of their sustenance means supporting them in identifying long-term goals including educational and financial goals, and even supporting their family members and community in obtaining the resources to care for them. It means doing what we can to meet the holistic needs of that young person, e.g. supporting them in accessing mental health care or teaching them financial literacy. By supporting their emotional, psychological, and physical strength, they will be better equipped to make the impact that calls them to the work in the first place.

Youth leaders are aware and equipped to deal with the challenges that come with being a leader. When sustaining youth leaders, it is important to ask, what do these youth need to know to ensure long-term involvement in the movement? Youth leaders should be made aware of burnout and be supported in identifying strategies to understand their limits and say “no.” Oftentimes, youth leaders who have been directly impacted feel compelled to engage in every opportunity to make a change or an impact, because they viscerally understand the urgent need for reform. This commitment can often be at their own expense and at the expense of their commitments to family, or their ability to simply be youth. It is vital that we encourage our young people to identify strategies to achieve balance, and tools to care for themselves.

Youth leaders are given opportunities to think about and engage in strategies that exist beyond a specific campaign or organization. Sustaining youth leaders also means identifying the resources necessary to support youth involvement beyond a specific campaign or organizational initiative. Youth who have been impacted by the justice system enter the movement to make change, not to participate in particular campaigns. Successful campaigns end, but our justice system remains, and it is important to find ways to channel their energy and expertise into efforts that exist beyond any one campaign or organization. Sustaining their leadership requires us to ensure that they are given the opportunities to think about the change they would like to achieve, and opportunities to explore different aspects of the work. That may mean encouraging them to

pursue opportunities with other organizations or helping them fund their own initiatives or programs.

Organizations have the capacity and understanding to hire youth leaders and to support them in navigating the lasting effects of justice involvement and trauma. Most importantly, sustaining youth leaders means addressing our funding and organizational structures to support hiring youth as full-time employees. It means integrating young people into all aspects of organizational culture and identifying funders and resources who are invested in building youth capacity, and who value the expertise of youth who have experienced the justice system. Oftentimes, this requires training other staff to be able to effectively manage and supervise young people who may be attending school part-time, may be caretakers or single parents, or may be suffering from long-term health impacts including depression and PTSD. Finally, organizations and funders should educate the donor community about the need to increase resources that are specifically devoted to supporting youth leadership, that may include additional training for youth and non-youth staff, additional mental health and trauma services, and benefits structures that support a healthy work environment.

## The Work Adults and Organizations Must Do

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### Practice What You Preach

Skills and characteristics for adults and organizations to ensure youth leadership:

- Empathy- the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner. Empathy is a key cornerstone in fostering youth leadership in your organization.
- Humility- the freedom of pride or arrogance. It is important for today's leaders to understand it is their responsibility to foster an environment where future youth leaders are not intimidated, and the relationship is a beneficial one for both sides.
- Discernment- the ability to judge well, in cultivating youth leaders should be able to see the strengths and weaknesses in their employee. The ability to surround the youth leader with quality people is pivotal to their future success.
- Courage- the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc. without fear. Courage may be the most important characteristic needed in developing youth leaders. It takes courage for current leaders to understand to create longstanding change they have to help nurture the upcoming leaders and know when to be hands off and give the youth room to prosper and take the organization to new heights.

- Self-management (time, emotions, care)- management of or by oneself; the taking of responsibility for one's own behavior and well-being. The work environment has to create a culture that is conducive to self-care and mental health to prevent burnout and promote a healthier staff.
- Awareness- knowledge or perception of a situation or fact. Awareness is a skill that needs to be present in every meeting, conversation, email, or any interactions with youth leaders. It is essential employers understand the continued success of social movements rely heavily on the development of youth leaders.
- Culture- The goal is to improve the current culture of your organization, creating an atmosphere where individuality, comradery, growth and development are encouraged and supported on all levels. Youth are the key to shifting cultures, it is our duty to provide the tools necessary to cultivate youth leaders to effectuate the changes needed in society for today, tomorrow and beyond.

### **Put Your Money and In-Kind Resources Where Your Mouth Is**

Organizational infrastructure and resources needed to ensure youth leadership. NJJN surveyed its membership to learn how organizations are supporting justice-involved youth leaders in their state campaigns. There were 11 respondents from 9 different organizations representing Virginia, North Carolina, Kansas, California, Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, and D.C.

These groups overwhelmingly acknowledged the importance of compensating young people for their time by providing stipends for work completed hourly or daily. In addition to the stipend, the groups provided training as one form of a professional development opportunity. Many of the groups had an informal leadership development curriculum. One of the groups highlighted used the Each One, Teach One Curriculum. Most groups reported frequent youth leader meetings. Weekly was the most common response to the frequency of these meetings, but responses ranged from three days a week for three hours a day to quarterly during the year.

Finally, respondents were asked what they thought was the most important thing in fostering support for justice involved leaders.

Here were some of their responses:

- Mentors or points-of-contact with similar experiences who can dedicate themselves fully to the youth leaders. - Kristen Powers, Youth Justice Project, Southern Coalition for Social Justice

- Mentoring, personal/career development, support for stable living and mental health services. - Indigo Mateo, CURYJ
- For CLIA, we've found that fostering support comes both from us, as adult leaders and mentors, and from peers in the other youth leaders. Facilitating those positive relationships, giving the youth leaders space to get to know each other and relate on the peer-to-peer level, is a powerful tool in increasing ownership of their experiences at CLIA. - Sarah Wall, CLIA
- Empowering the youth leaders to take ownership of their organization. Teaching them how to interact with policymakers while maintaining their authentic selves. - Mike Fonkert, Kansas Appleseed

All these recommendations take intentional and dedicated time and financial resources. This means organizations must put their money where their mouths are in terms of showing a true commitment to empowering justice-involved youth leaders.

## Time to Act

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Justice-involved youth are powerful advocates and knowledgeable experts in the work of dismantling systemically racist and unjust criminal legal systems. They know these systems intimately. They know where practice is dangerously deficient and different from policy and where “reforms” fall desperately short of improving the lives of young people.

They should not be an afterthought or an addition to the policy table after policy decisions have been set. They should be at the head of the table or being diligently groomed to sit there soon. For traditional nonprofit policy and legal organizations to move toward this goal they must be purposeful and strategic about empowering, protecting, supporting, recruiting, and sustaining youth leaders. This work requires funding to compensate youth, it requires capacity to orient and train youth, and an understanding that it is difficult to advocate for systemic change, while the young person many still be in the middle of advocating for themselves, their housing, their employment, their education, and their future.

## For More Information

Examples of effective youth leadership development:

- National examples
  - [United We Dream](#)
  - [Alliance for Youth Action](#)
- State examples
  - [Young Women's Freedom Center](#) (San Francisco)
  - [Youth Justice Coalition](#) (LA)
  - [I Have a Future](#)
  - [Teens Leading the Way \(UTEC\)](#)
- Local examples
  - [Black Swan Academy](#) (DC)
  - [Girls for Gender Equity](#) (NY)
  - [Young Women United](#) (Albuquerque)

Additional resources:

- [Supporting Pathways to Long-Term Success for System-Involved Youth: Lessons Learned](#), American Youth Policy Forum
- [Bringing It Together: Uniting Youth Organizing, Development, and Services for Long-Term Sustainability](#), Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing
- [Building Transformative Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing](#), Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing
- [Youth Justice New Jersey: Youth Leadership Training Curriculum](#), New Jersey Institute for Social Justice and Youth Justice New Jersey