



Elevating Youth Voice to Change the System

A Case Study of the Santa Clara County Youth Advisory Council

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LEARNING *for* ACTION

Prepared for:



Fresh Lifelines for Youth



Introduction: A brief introduction to the Santa Clara County Youth Advisory Council (YAC) and this case study



Foundation of Youth Voice and Partnership: FLY and the Santa Clara County Probation Department's role in supporting the YAC



The YAC's Community and System Change Work: How the YAC builds will, drives practice change, and contributes to policy change



YAC Structure and Support: Promising practices on how the YAC finds, equips, enables, and connects young people to bring about positive system change



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What Could Come Next for the YAC? Additional ways that the system could benefit from the expertise of Youth Justice Consultants

Introduction

- The Youth Advisory Council in Brief
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"If we want to transform [the juvenile justice system], **we need to listen to the experts of the system: Youth!**"

- Youth Justice Consultant

FLY

Following

Light

Yearned

THE YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL IN BRIEF

The [Youth Advisory Council](#) (YAC) launched in 2017 through a partnership between the [Santa Clara County Juvenile Probation Department](#) (SCC Probation Department) and [Fresh Lifelines for Youth](#) (FLY), a nonprofit organization that works to prevent juvenile crime and incarceration through legal education, leadership training, and one-on-one mentoring. The YAC is composed of a group of **Youth Justice Consultants: youth who have directly experienced the policies and practices of the juvenile justice system and who use that experience and expertise to bring about positive change in the system.**

Mission Statement

The mission of the YAC is to help youth successfully complete probation by:

- Enlightening the SCC Probation Department regarding the challenges system-involved youth face
- Advising the juvenile justice system in the implementation of new strategies and practices, and
- Supporting youth in making better decisions that will affect their freedom, future, and life success.

See the YAC's Theory of Change in Appendix A.

"We have our mission statement that defines who we are as a council...it's **young people from my background that have a chance to develop themselves professionally, make change, and impact the juvenile justice system** - it needs a lot of reform to help the young people who are struggling through the system. Those of us coming from poverty, gangs, and violence... it is the chance to become more than the criminal image. It's us sharing our story, sending a message of change or lesson through struggle."

- Youth Justice Consultant

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

This case study shines a light on the work of the Santa Clara County Youth Advisory Council, capturing the story of how their work emerged and evolved over time. In response to the recent growth in the movement for engaging youth perspectives in youth-focused policy and practices, this case study also serves as a summary of experiences and learning from the YAC that may inform other organizations and counties that are considering a similar model of youth engagement and leadership. For more information about the methods used for this case study see Appendix B.



Foundation of Youth Voice and Partnership

- Youth Voice is Rooted in the Soul of FLY
- Santa Clara County Probation Department Partnership

"[Youth Justice Consultants are] young people who [are] leveraging [their] experience and converting it into the passion, the fire, the fortitude to...make the system more fair, more just for other people going through it."

- FLY Staff

YOUTH VOICE IS ROOTED IN THE SOUL OF FLY

Amplifying youth voice is integral to FLY's DNA. FLY's original founding model grew out of ideas and feedback provided directly by youth who were detained and who hoped to prevent other young people from becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Twenty years later, while FLY's model has grown and expanded, FLY continues to prioritize youth voice throughout its work -- not just in what they do, but in *how* they do it. FLY engages and collaborates with young people as true partners in their work.

The YAC is an embodiment of FLY's commitment to authentic youth voice as a critical component to transforming the juvenile justice system. **The YAC is conceived of, developed, and led by youth and for youth. Youth Justice Consultants use their experience and voice to educate stakeholders, improve system policies and practices, and become advocates for the rights and needs of system-involved youth.** As part of their participation, Youth Justice Consultants receive legal education and ongoing professional development training. The YAC's efforts, along with FLY's other work, contribute to realizing the organization's mission of preventing juvenile crime and incarceration.

"Power was shared from the beginning about what the council should look like...All of the opportunities that come to the council are presented to us first - what they look like, how we feel about it. What I have realized since joining the council is that's rare. The more I get exposed to this work and working with different organizations locally and nationally - that's really rare."

- Youth Justice Consultant

SANTA CLARA COUNTY PROBATION DEPARTMENT PARTNERSHIP

The YAC is overseen by FLY and the SCC Probation Department. The two entities partner to support the vision and mission of the YAC, providing a platform, removing barriers, and supporting the Youth Justice Consultants to realize their talent and potential. As the Probation Department is one of the key players in the juvenile justice system, their involvement in this partnership is a critical element to the YAC's success.

"I truly believe **the key to success in Santa Clara County is the partnership between the Probation Department and [FLY]**...having that balance. I think that's what makes them unique and really, truly work as well as it does."

- External Stakeholder



The YAC's Community and System Change Work

"You have [someone] making choices for minorities and kids in the system, [who] has no relation to understand what young people and their families are going through because they've never been through it. They've never experienced racial bias. **How are you going to solve problems if you don't witness [them] firsthand?**"

- Youth Justice Consultant

- How the YAC Builds Will for Community and System Change
- How the YAC Drives Practice Change within the System
- How the YAC Contributes to Policy Change

One of the greatest strengths of the YAC is the lived experience and perspective that the Youth Justice Consultants bring to their work. Their voices, feedback, and insights center the humanity of youth who have directly experienced the juvenile justice system. Their work exposes gaps in perspectives within the system and serves as a catalyst for system change. The following section describes three dimensions of the YAC's system change work:

▪ **WILL-BUILDING** ▪ **PRACTICE CHANGE** ▪ **POLICY CHANGE**

"That humanity piece sometimes gets overlooked, and that connection to the kids and the families can get overlooked. They [the YAC] bring that to the forefront - **'What does it feel like being on the other end of that process and protocol?'**"

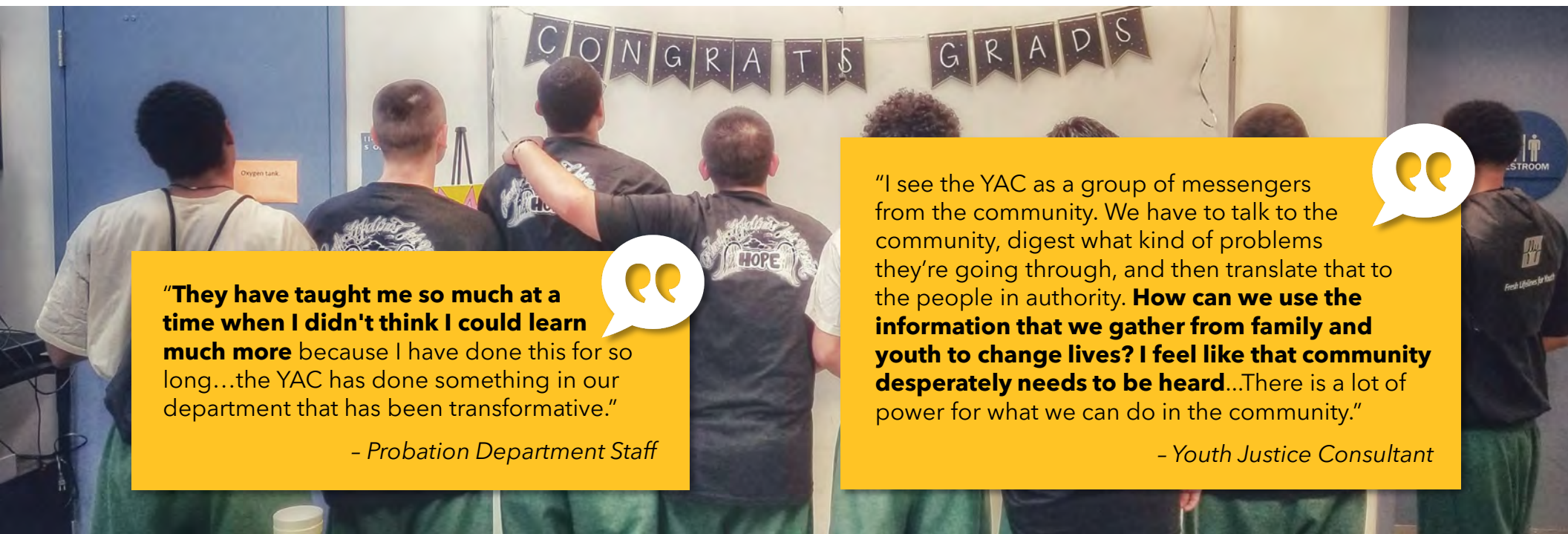
- External Stakeholder

HOW THE YAC BUILDS WILL FOR COMMUNITY AND SYSTEM CHANGE

Will Building with Community and System Leaders

While many community and system leaders express a desire to involve young people, doing so effectively and meaningfully requires more than just interest. For the YAC, **building support for substantive youth engagement has taken time and intention.**

Youth Justice Consultants courageously share their truths to develop relationships and spark a will for change. By sharing their experiences with system and community partners, Youth Justice Consultants shine a light on shortcomings and missteps of the current system, providing juvenile justice system staff an opportunity to see the system from a different perspective. Their experiences center the human impact of system policies and practices. The partnership also fosters connection between young people and system partners, which promotes greater alignment in goals and desired outcomes.



"**They have taught me so much at a time when I didn't think I could learn much more** because I have done this for so long...the YAC has done something in our department that has been transformative."

- Probation Department Staff

"I see the YAC as a group of messengers from the community. We have to talk to the community, digest what kind of problems they're going through, and then translate that to the people in authority. **How can we use the information that we gather from family and youth to change lives? I feel like that community desperately needs to be heard...**There is a lot of power for what we can do in the community."

- Youth Justice Consultant

HOW THE YAC BUILDS WILL FOR COMMUNITY AND SYSTEM CHANGE (CONTINUED)

Sharing Knowledge and Building Credibility and Trust with Youth and Families

Youth Justice Consultants' system experience, including successfully completing probation and collaborating with system partners, adds to their credibility and trust with youth and families who are newly navigating the juvenile justice system.

The YAC regularly facilitates orientations for youth who are newly on probation and their families, to share information, resources, and the mindset they need to successfully complete probation. Youth Justice Consultants designed the content of the orientations based on what they wish they had known when they were newly on probation. The orientation provides:

- Important information about probation - what it is, the role of the probation officer, common probation terms and orders, and dispositional options
- An opportunity for Youth Justice Consultants to share about their experiences with the system, so that attendees gain insight into what they can expect

The orientations have been well-received, both by community members and system partners. SCC Probation Department staff have even expressed interest in creating additional opportunities to connect youth directly to Youth Justice Consultants, such as by having Youth Justice Consultants attend court one day a week to meet with youth newly on probation.

"When we share that experience and our side of the story with a youth who this is their first offense, it helps them to realize that there is a bigger picture than their one situation. A lot of times it could be frustrating for a youth who doesn't know what to do or doesn't know the answers. Not that we have the answers, but we show how we solved our problems back then."

- Youth Justice Consultant

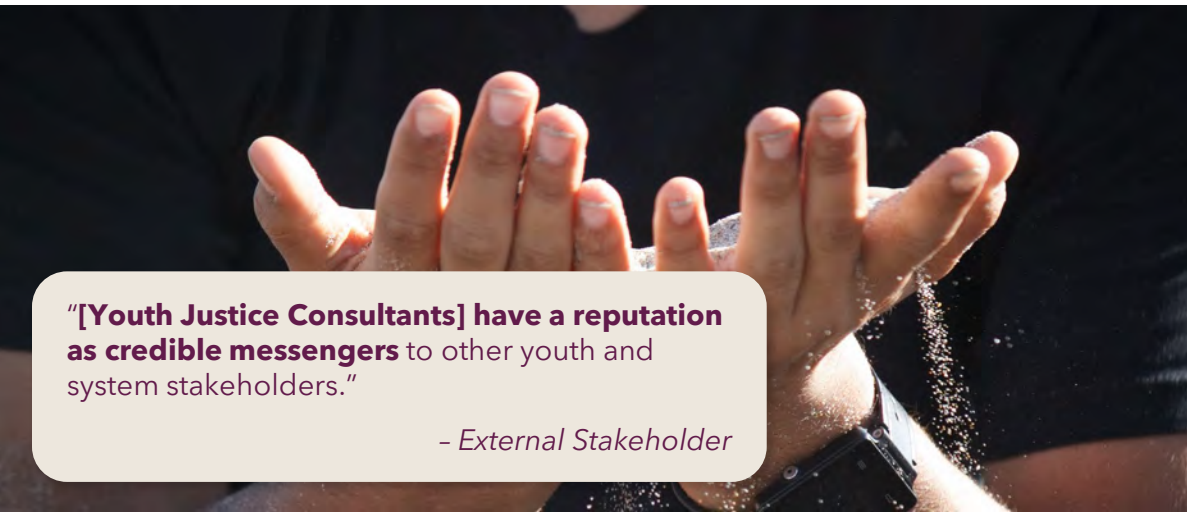
REP stands for Redemption, Education, and Purpose:

The name for REP orientations was created by three founding members of the YAC who were tried in the adult court system. It is meant to send a message to young people newly entering the system that their ***past mistakes do not dictate who they can become.***

- **Redemption** - a person is not defined by their mistakes, but able to be redeemed
- **Education** - education can help a person move forward
- **Purpose** - there is purpose in contributing to oneself and one's community

"[Youth Justice Consultants] have a reputation as credible messengers to other youth and system stakeholders."

- External Stakeholder



HOW THE YAC DRIVES PRACTICE CHANGE WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Training System Staff

Youth Justice Consultants participate in the SCC Deputy Probation Officer (DPO) Core Training, the training event for new probation officers. At this event, Youth Justice Consultants share their experiences, engage in dialogue, and shape new probation officers' perspectives on how they can most effectively and humanely engage with young people on probation.

"We work with all the people that we had to deal with when we were in the system as authoritative figures. And **we are the group of people that is in their best interest to work with, because we benefit them and the community by sharing our actual experiences with something they have not experienced.**"

- Youth Justice Consultant

"They came to me with a request to have them participate as a part of the training. **I was skeptical at first of their abilities. [I was] absolutely mistaken. They did a fantastic job - most valuable experiences for POs.** I became a big believer and hope to have them in every training."

- Probation Department Staff

Due to the overwhelming positive feedback about the Youth Justice Consultants' participation in the DPO Core Trainings, the YAC and system leaders are considering how to use a similar model with local law enforcement and police academies. Youth Justice Consultants have been invited to participate in the Juvenile Corrections Officer Academy, and the SCC Sheriff's Office has expressed interest in pursuing a similar partnership.



"One of our biggest goals is really to make system change...we want to see change and inspire people in power. Since I joined YAC I've met a lot of people who genuinely want to hear our voice, and as we expand and keep on going, we will meet more and more of those types of people."

- Youth Justice Consultant

HOW THE YAC DRIVES PRACTICE CHANGE WITHIN THE SYSTEM (CONTINUED)

Consulting on System Programs and Processes

On an ad hoc basis, the Probation Department asks the YAC for their input on new programs or system processes. For example:

- The YAC hosted focus groups with young people to gather feedback on how services could improve as part of a restructuring of the William F. James Ranch ("the Ranch") Reentry Program. Youth Justice Consultants also did a walkthrough of the Ranch before the new campus opened to survey the new setup and provide input into how the physical space could be made safer and more conducive to rehabilitation.
- Youth Justice Consultants advised on a new probation dismissal protocol, successfully advocating for the dismissal process to include a Probation Officer sitting down with youth in-person and talking through the dismissal checklist instead of doing it over the phone, in order to create a more supportive and youth-centered process.

"...[We were] ready to open and **they found four- or five-blind spots that we never would have thought of**, and they did it in minutes."

- Probation Department Staff

"At every stage that systems go through in developing new programs and protocols we have a tendency to design from the systems perspective and we forget about the people involved, the families and youth. **We need them to help keep us in check that we're designing something that is going to work for them.**"

- External Stakeholder



HOW THE YAC DRIVES PRACTICE CHANGE WITHIN THE SYSTEM (CONTINUED)

Promoting Promising Practices in the Field

Sharing experiences and promising practices has been an important way for the YAC to gain support and further influence the system. Youth Justice Consultants have participated in local and national events and conferences on behalf of the YAC, where they share about and showcase their work.

"We get to tell the nation about the YAC, and when we do, we get to inspire [others], and different organizations ask for our blueprint."

- Youth Justice Consultant

Events and Conferences

- **Institute for Police and Youth Engagement**¹ - A three-day training program for law enforcement executives from around the country.² Two Youth Justice Consultants were selected to attend the 2018 Institute, along with other youth from across the country, to share their experiences with and ideas about law enforcement. They joined law enforcement leaders in a Roundtable discussion about best practices and approaches for improving police and youth relations.
- **Annual Crime and Gang Summit** - Mayor Liccardo and the Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force convene representatives from the City of San Jose, nonprofit organizations, and local neighborhoods to engage in workshops and discussions to build and expand partnerships that make San Jose a safer place to live, work, and raise a family.³ In 2018, the YAC facilitated a workshop at the Summit, educating attendees on the effects, dangers, and possible consequences of using social media.
- **The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ)** - A nationwide coalition of State Advisory Groups and allies dedicated to preventing children and youth from becoming involved in courts and upholding the highest standards of care when youth are charged with wrongdoing and enter the justice system.⁴
 - **2018 National Conference, "Claiming the Future: Uniting to End Disparities"** - Youth Justice Consultants presented with SCC Probation Department staff and the Burns Institute on promoting equity in time on probation and the probation dismissal protocol.
 - **2020 National Conference, "Dreaming Big Together: Youth Justice Reimagined"** (November 2020) - The YAC has been selected to present on their youth voice practices.
- **Beyond the Bench (BTB)** - An annual conference hosted by the Judicial Council of California and the Center for Families, Children, & The Courts, focuses on learning and collaboration to provide innovative solutions for improving outcomes for children, youth, and families, especially those involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The YAC helped to design the agenda for the 2020 BTB Conference and was scheduled to be a featured speaker. (The 2020 conference was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.)
- **The YAC Showcase** - The YAC annually hosts a showcase to highlight the accomplishments of its members, as well as inform juvenile justice system partners and community members about the YAC's work.

¹ The event was put on by the U.S. Department of Justice and the International Association of Chiefs of Police with the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, and in partnership with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

² "Police and Youth Engagement Supporting the Role of Law Enforcement in the Juvenile Justice System." IACP, www.theiacp.org/projects/police-and-youth-engagement.

³ "Crime and Gang Summit - Mayor's Prevention Taskforce." City of San Jose, 2018, www.sanjoseca.gov/Home/Components/Calendar/Event/563/19?toggle=allpast.

⁴ Coalition for Juvenile Justice. "About Us." www.juvjustice.org/about-us.

HOW THE YAC CONTRIBUTES TO POLICY CHANGE

The YAC approaches policy change through system advocacy and co-creation with system partners. As part of their system change efforts, Youth Justice Consultants sit on various collaborative councils and workgroups.

Collaborative Councils and Workgroups

- **The Juvenile Court Aligned Action Network (JCAAN)** - Formed in early 2018 to push the work of the Juvenile Court Education Partnership, JCAAN is a collaborative of more than 20 organizations committed to achieving parity for justice-engaged youth in high school completion.⁵ Youth Justice Consultants joined the collaborative in late 2019.
- **The Juvenile Justice System Collaborative (JJSC)** - As part of the collaborative, the YAC works with system stakeholders (including the Office of the County Executive, Juvenile Courts, Probation, District Attorney, the Public Defender, local governments, law enforcement, schools and community based service providers) to prevent youth involvement in the juvenile justice system, continuously improve processes within the system, and ensure the deployment of evidence-based practices to more effectively rehabilitate system-involved youth. The collaborative consists of the Race Equity in Justice Systems Workgroup (REJS) and the Race Equity through Prevention Workgroup (REP).
 - REP focuses on ensuring race equity, promoting child well-being and reducing racial and ethnic disparities in justice system intervention programs. Youth Justice Consultants participate in monthly meetings focused on promoting structures and policy change to prevent youth of color from becoming involved in the justice system.⁶ In 2018, in partnership with REP and the Burns Institute, Youth Justice Consultants conducted focus groups with students at Mt. Pleasant High School to discuss disciplinary practices and suspension policies, which later led to policy and practice reforms at the school.
- **The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) National Juvenile Justice Youth Advisory Council** - One of the YAC's Youth Justice Consultants represents Santa Clara County on AECF's National Council. Members of the National Council work in partnership with AECF's [Juvenile Justice Strategy Group](#) to develop recommendations that inform and strengthen the Foundation's work in the national juvenile justice reform movement.

"Youth are the experts and they need more than to be heard, [they] need their voices to be put into action."

- Youth Justice Consultant

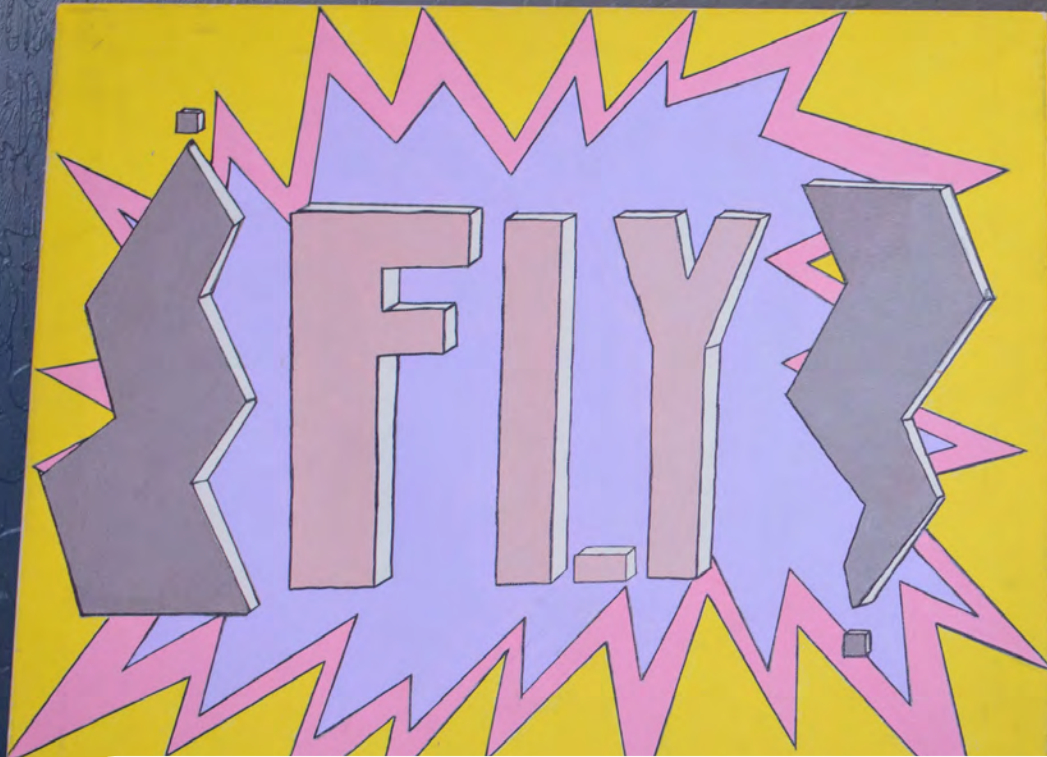
"They participate in many meetings with county and community members. They are fantastic. I have seen other groups speak, but not to their level of preparation...they frame what they say from an understanding of the system...they can articulate and connect with their own experiences."

- Probation Department Staff

⁵ Opportunity Youth Partnership. "Juvenile Court Aligned Action Network." Opportunity Youth Partnership - Santa Clara County, 25 Sept. 2018, sccoyp.org/initiatives/juvenile-court-aligned-action-network/.

⁶ "Juvenile Justice Systems Collaborative (JJSC)." Juvenile Justice Systems Collaborative (JJSC) - Cultural Competency - County of Santa Clara, County of Santa Clara Office of Cultural Competency, 30 June 2020, www.sccgov.org/sites/occ/jjsc/Pages/home.aspx.

YAC Structure and Support



"[The YAC is] family-based. **Family...talks through difficult decisions, and family also helps each other.** You're there to discipline, but show love and respect. Criticize, but be positive."

- Youth Justice Consultant

- Intentional Recruitment: How the YAC Finds Young People
- Leadership Development: How the YAC Equips Young People
- A Supportive and Equitable Environment: How the YAC Enables Young People
- Building Relationships with Key Decision Makers: How the YAC Connects Young People

The YAC was built on a foundation of Youth-led Participatory Action Research (Y-PAR), in which youth who have directly experienced the policies and practices of the juvenile justice system use their experience and expertise to put forth policy solutions to bring about positive system change. Young people who have directly experienced the justice system have a unique and intimate understanding of the system, the needs of the youth in the system, and the ways in which the system needs to change to better support youth.

The YAC continues to evolve over time, as founding members graduate from the council and new members join, bringing new experiences, ideas, and energy. The YAC's fluidity and ability to evolve is key to its sustainability, providing the flexibility to respond to emerging needs of youth and the system, and to focus on issues that its members determine are most urgent and important. Members are supported by YAC Coordinators, FLY and SCC Probation Department staff, who provide ongoing coaching, guidance, and continuity to the YAC's work. However, the YAC is truly youth-designed and youth-led.

The following section describes promising practices from the YAC's work and experience. These practices are organized according to a framework outlined in the Youth Investment, Engagement, and Leadership Development (YIELD) research project.⁷ YIELD acknowledges that cultivating youth participation and leadership is "more of an art than a science" and identified several promising practices that are relevant to the YAC's structure for system change work:

- **FIND** - intentional recruitment to engage a diverse cross-section of young people as participants and leaders
- **EQUIP** - building young people's capabilities and assets to unlock their potential
- **ENABLE** - a supportive and equitable environment in which young people's contributions are included and acted upon
- **CONNECT** - connections among young people and adult decision makers are fundamental drivers of change

"It wouldn't make a lot of sense for older adults to make decisions about youth when they haven't even been through what we have been through....**A lot of people think they know what youth need but they really don't.**"

- Youth Justice Consultant



⁷ Catino, J., Battistini, E., & Babchek, A. (2018, May). Young People Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health: Toward a New Normal. https://www.summitfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/YIELD_summary_final.pdf

INTENTIONAL RECRUITMENT: HOW THE YAC FINDS YOUNG PEOPLE

The YAC recruits new members on a rolling basis, drawing on opportunities that they and their system partners have to identify qualified young people with relevant experience.

"I met the YAC when I attended [the REP Orientation] with my family. I didn't really know anything about how to be on probation. I learned about all of the things I could and couldn't do. Obviously I had an idea, but **I learned a lot and that played a big role in me successfully completing probation.**"

- Youth Justice Consultant

"[The YAC] is a chance to influence the very system that once scrutinized their every move and behaviors, in a way that can change things for future kids and families."

- External Stakeholder

Recruitment Process

- 1 Youth Justice Consultants, YAC Coordinators, and other stakeholders refer potential members to the council.
- 2 One of the Youth Justice Consultants reaches out to the potential member to share information about the YAC and gauge the candidate's initial interest and readiness for joining.
- 3 If the candidate is ready and willing to join, they interview with the YAC Coordinators, who vet candidates on their availability, experience, and commitment.
- 4 Candidates next interview with two current Youth Justice Consultants, who assess the candidate's fit with the existing members of the YAC - considering criteria such as diversity in experience and viewpoints, YAC cohesion, and desire to participate.
- 5 After the candidate completes the interviews, the whole YAC meets to debrief. The Youth Justice Consultants who conducted the interview report out, sharing their perspectives on the candidate.
- 6 Finally, the full YAC votes on whether the candidate is invited to join. The YAC Coordinators cast a vote only in the event of a tie among YAC members.



"[Youth Justice Consultants] are beautifully creative and want to make sure the young people they bring on board respect the YAC just as much as they do."

- YAC Coordinator

UNDERSTANDING AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO RECRUITMENT

While the YAC aims to have 10-12 members at any given time, they often have fewer, due to challenges with both recruitment and retention. Many potential candidates who have newly completed probation are simply not ready to reengage with the Probation Department. Youth Justice Consultants acknowledge that there is a negative perception of the Probation Department among many candidates, which hinders their openness to even learning about the YAC. Ultimately, participating in the YAC requires members to sit at the table and engage with Probation Department staff as partners. This can be especially challenging for young people who have been traumatized by the very system they are expected to partner with and improve.⁸

Retaining members has also been a challenge for the YAC. Sometimes members who join the council realize they don't have the time or energy to commit to the council's work. Additionally, young people's lives are more likely to be in a state of transition, which can naturally lead to member turnover. Finally, some young people who join the council simply don't work out. One Youth Justice Consultant summed up these challenges succinctly: "It's not for everyone."

The recruitment process serves as a valuable skill-building opportunity for Youth Justice Consultants. To address the challenges described above, YAC members have adjusted their approach to recruitment over time, coming up with creative ways to talk to and engage potential new members and fine tune their criteria for vetting candidates. Their leadership in the process creates a strong sense of ownership. The YAC members choose who joins, so they take responsibility both for successful members and for those members who join and don't work out.

The Y-PAR approach is so key to the YAC's model and operations because it fully places the expertise and decision making in the hands of the Youth Justice Consultants. This level of ownership and accountability builds their skills to adjust, fine-tune, and refine their work to recruit a diverse and committed group of young people to move forward the work of the YAC. Members of the YAC each bring their own perspectives and unique experiences with the system, creating a solid group of diverse voices.

"When I think about the YAC it's about sharing our experiences. A lot of youth are thrown into it without help. Also giving our ideas and opinions to change policies. **We give our input to a lot of organizations who take us seriously as formerly system-involved youth.**"

- Youth Justice Consultant

"[YAC candidates] have to be in a place to be ready to participate in that meaningful change. Not everyone is, and they're honest with themselves that they're not there yet. They don't want to participate and interrupt the integrity of the program."

- YAC Coordinator



⁸ In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated shelter-in-place mandate has reduced the pool of potential participants and has created additional logistical challenges for recruitment, including identifying, contacting, and vetting candidates.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: HOW THE YAC EQUIPS YOUNG PEOPLE

Engaging in systems change work and navigating relationships with system and community leaders requires an elevated level of professionalism and a deep understanding of how the system works. Youth Justice Consultants receive professional development training, coaching, and support from YAC Coordinators to develop their leadership skills and realize their potential as system change agents.

Youth Justice Consultants participate in monthly Professional Development Trainings on topics including public speaking, juvenile justice system policy and practices, civic engagement, implicit bias, and job readiness. The training content is flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of the Youth Justice Consultants, allowing them to determine what is most helpful in equipping and empowering them to engage as effective contributors.


YAC Coordinators provide individual coaching and support to each Youth Justice

Consultant, meeting with them two times a month to focus on individual empowerment, self-esteem, self-confidence, and resilience. Youth Justice Consultants set short- and long-term goals at the beginning of each program year. With the support of their coaches, they track progress toward these goals, strategize about next steps, and discuss leadership opportunities to pursue. One-on-one coaching provides vital support to Youth Justice Consultants to build skills, cultivate their voice, and feel confident and competent as individuals and leaders.

"We are very fortunate to have coaches that understand we are still growing, developing, changing, and they give us that space."

- Youth Justice Consultant

The mental health and wellbeing of Youth Justice Consultants are top priorities of the YAC, which the YAC supports through safe and supportive physical and emotional spaces where young people can learn, share, and grow. YAC Coordinators facilitate healing circles to provide a space to reflect, address trauma, and heal. Additionally, YAC Coordinators attend to young people's needs by providing food at meetings and arranging transportation to and from activities for Youth Justice Consultants. The YAC sees themselves as a family - helping one another, talking through difficult topics, and showing each other love and respect.



"YAC has definitely helped me grow both personally and professionally. They taught me how to communicate well with others in a professional setting, at home, with my friends, and at school...I was able to develop stronger relationships with people in my class or people I've met along the way, and I can't thank them enough for that."

- Youth Justice Consultant

A SUPPORTIVE AND EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENT: HOW THE YAC ENABLES YOUNG PEOPLE

Creating environments in which young people are treated as professionals and partners in the work is necessary to enable them to make a difference.

Youth Justice Consultants receive stipends for their time and expertise and (where possible) have voting power at meetings to put them on equal footing with other system partners at the table. In the future, YAC Coordinators also hope to be able to offer full-time employment opportunities for Youth Justice Consultants. Providing greater economic support and equitable compensation would further enable young people to create and drive their own reform initiatives and agendas.

Youth Justice Consultants have what they need to engage in meetings. Successful practices include adequately preparing Youth Justice Consultants for meetings in advance, clarifying their role in workgroup meetings, checking for understanding before and after meetings, and gathering their feedback to inform future meeting engagement.

"It's a completely different role for young people now. You know, before it was more of just conducting focus groups... it was never really truly involving young people and having them sit at the table where those decisions and where the policies are being developed. You know **we really want their full participation as a partner, rather than as a subgroup.**"

- External Stakeholder

"It's not just about having them at the table, but **how do they access their voice and authentically share their voice in a way that moves systems change and creates solutions?**"

- FLY Staff



UNDERSTANDING AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Creating an environment where young people fully participate continues to be an area of focus. Youth Justice Consultants have attended meetings with justice system partners where they “hardly spoke two sentences,” or where they “felt like a mascot.” In response, Youth Justice Consultants created a list of group agreements that articulate conditions that need to be in place for them to feel empowered to authentically participate. Sharing these group agreements with system and community partners helped to raise awareness and to create a more supportive and equitable environment where Youth Justice Consultants could engage authentically and truly partner with system players to discuss challenges and co-design solutions.

*“We ask all of our system partners who request that [YAC] voices be present in the room that they embrace our [Youth Justice Consultants] as colleagues. Obviously that hasn’t always happened and **incorporating young people into these spaces is something that is fairly new. Everybody is still kind of learning and growing together.**”*


– YAC Coordinator

YAC Coordinators and system partners are constantly adjusting their approaches to find the right balance between creating a safe and supportive space for young people on the one hand and treating them as equal partners and professionals on the other. A few external stakeholders expressed concern that the Youth Justice Consultants are coddled, which while well-intended, may undermine efforts to make system partners see Youth Justice Consultants as true partners in their work.

“I worry that there is a lot of protection around the YAC from interacting with stakeholders, and there are a lot of ground rules...There are like speeches at a gathering about how the youth are here, and we need to be extra mindful, and make sure to shake their hands...This is being said in front of the youth, like they are some sort of group that has to be handled preciously...If we’re trying to be inclusive and streamline, it’s doing the opposite.”

– External Stakeholder

At the same time, many Youth Justice Consultants experienced trauma during their time in the system. Therefore, **it is especially important that system collaboration spaces are healing-centered, trauma-responsive, and inclusive.** YAC Coordinators disrupt non-trauma-informed spaces when they see that youth voices are being diminished. YAC Coordinators continue to search for the right balance between advocating on behalf of Youth Justice Consultants where appropriate while also creating space for them to navigate partnerships independently.



“We are not youth - we are young adults. We represent youth. That line people don’t understand; they treat us like a youth instead of a partner.”

– Youth Justice Consultant

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH KEY DECISION MAKERS: HOW THE YAC CONNECTS YOUNG PEOPLE

Connection and building relationships with key decision makers, policymakers, and professional networks is another important aspect of engaging young people in systems change work.

“Going through the juvenile justice system, society might treat you different or look at you different... **Being in YAC made me feel like I redeemed myself - the stupid mistakes I made when I was a youth**, missing out on my education. Working on changing and establishing new local policy issues [within] our juvenile justice system, by sharing my experiences and working in the community, says a lot.”

– Youth Justice Consultant

System Partners

Through the YAC, Youth Justice Consultants connect with key stakeholders, leaders, and decision makers within the juvenile justice system including the SCC Probation Department, the District Attorney’s Office, and the Public Defender’s Office. These connections create opportunities for the Youth Justice Consultants to build relationships and credibility among system partners, which helps to create a pathway for system change.

Community Partners

By participating in system-related task forces and workgroups, Youth Justice Consultants also have opportunities to connect with valuable community partners and nonprofit leaders. These connections lead to additional opportunities for Youth Justice Consultants to share their perspective and to amplify their input.

Peer and Professional Networks

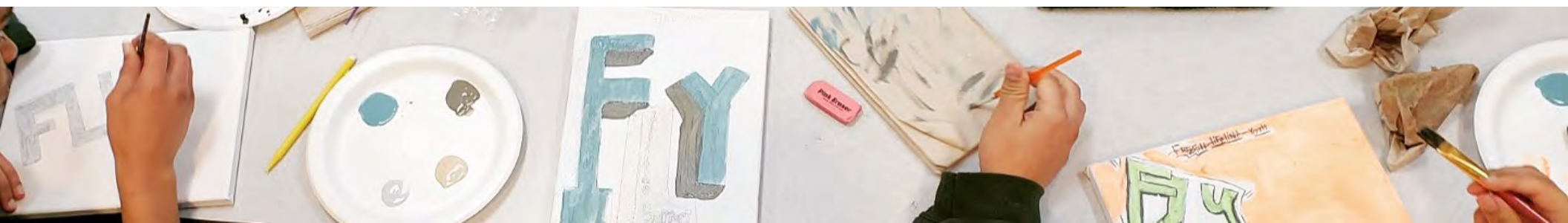
Youth Justice Consultants also have opportunities to connect with other youth advocates and networks through their participation in local and national conferences or events. These opportunities allow young people to build promising new connections, learn from their peers, and expand their professional networks, which may lead to future opportunities.

“[Youth Justice Consultants] have really truly been able to put themselves out there...**they are respected enough to be allowed through that door and to be a part of that. I think that alone is a huge accomplishment.**”

– External Stakeholder

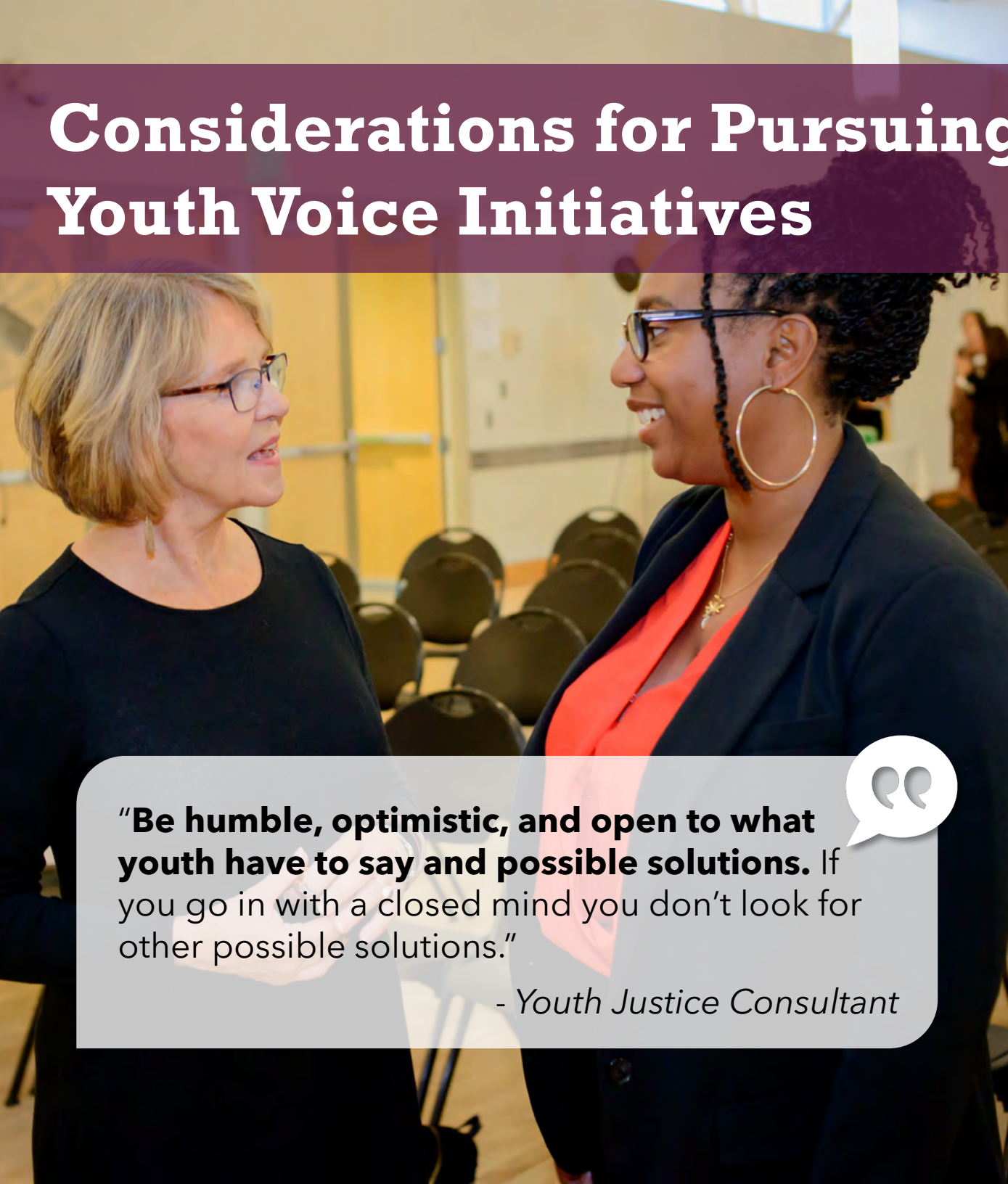
“As people...meet our young people and see what they’re about and see what they add to the work and how valuable their feedback is, they want to come back and get their input on things.”

– FLY Staff



Considerations for Pursuing Youth Voice Initiatives

- Conditions for Success
- Establishing a Successful Model

A photograph of two women standing and talking. The woman on the left has short blonde hair and wears glasses and a black top. The woman on the right has dark curly hair, wears glasses, large hoop earrings, a red top, and a dark blazer. They are in a room with rows of black chairs in the background.

"Be humble, optimistic, and open to what youth have to say and possible solutions. If you go in with a closed mind you don't look for other possible solutions."

- Youth Justice Consultant

The following considerations are included to inform other organizations, systems, and counties who are considering a model similar to the YAC for youth engagement and leadership. However, the conditions and founding practices that have contributed to the YAC's success at engaging youth and informing system change work may be unique to Santa Clara County. In deciding whether a model like the YAC might work in other places, organizations and counties should explore unique community strengths, values, and ripe opportunities, in addition to critically evaluating the time and resources they are willing and able to invest in potential youth partners.

"What we're doing is a model and needs to be adjusted to how their community is. There won't be another Santa Clara County YAC; every council is one of a kind. **Put thought into the idea of having a council. It's a trend...Think about what will set up youth for success or failure; not just because they want to set up a Youth Advisory Council.**"

- Youth Justice Consultant

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

A trusted community and system partner.

FLY's credibility in Santa Clara County, along with their long-standing relationships with the juvenile justice system opened doors for the YAC in a way that may not have been possible without FLY.

"An organization like **FLY...with the deep trust through established partnerships with the system** serves as a conduit between young people who are willing to step outside of their trauma and inject their voice on behalf of the experience of current and future young people, and a system that is ready to receive that."

- FLY Staff

Probation Department partnership and buy-in. The openness of the SCC Probation Department set the YAC up to make meaningful impact. Probation invited Youth Justice Consultant involvement and has connected them to staff at all levels of the organization, thereby embedding and normalizing the YAC's participation and expanding opportunities for Youth Justice Consultants to influence practices and policies. The SCC Probation Department demonstrated their deep value of the YAC by including the YAC in their strategic plan and vision, and by committing funding and resources to their work.

"It's a priority of the Probation Department and that alone is system change."

- FLY Staff

System- and community-level champions. Santa Clara County has a rich history of community and system collaboration that drives system reform efforts. The structure, operations, and key champions within Santa Clara County community and systems created the conditions for the YAC. The system's "appetite for reform" was critical to its establishment and evolution.

"The system has been very fortunate to have a number of enlightened leaders... who really care, who are focused on getting results for young people, who have an equity lens. **Those leaders really recognized the gaps in their field of view and said - we need young people to help us figure this out.**"

- External Stakeholder

ESTABLISHING A SUCCESSFUL MODEL

A youth-led design process. Founding members of the YAC engaged in an eight-month design process to define the YAC's mission, values, and goals. They facilitated focus groups with youth throughout the juvenile justice system to gain their perspective and determine what to prioritize. From there, they built the infrastructure and created the culture that is the YAC.

"Who better to change the system than the young people who navigated it themselves?"

- YAC Coordinator



Committed staff. Bringing staff onboard who are invested in the lives of young people and the community at large has further contributed to a culture of trust and credibility. The YAC Coordinators know and understand well the communities of the youth they are supporting. They lead with love, putting it at the center of how they engage with and support the Youth Justice Consultants.

"It's finding those people that are committed to youth leadership, youth development, and see those opportunities in the young people. It's finding those people that a program has a chance to be successful. The selection of the people that are going to be leading this work is critical."

- External Stakeholder

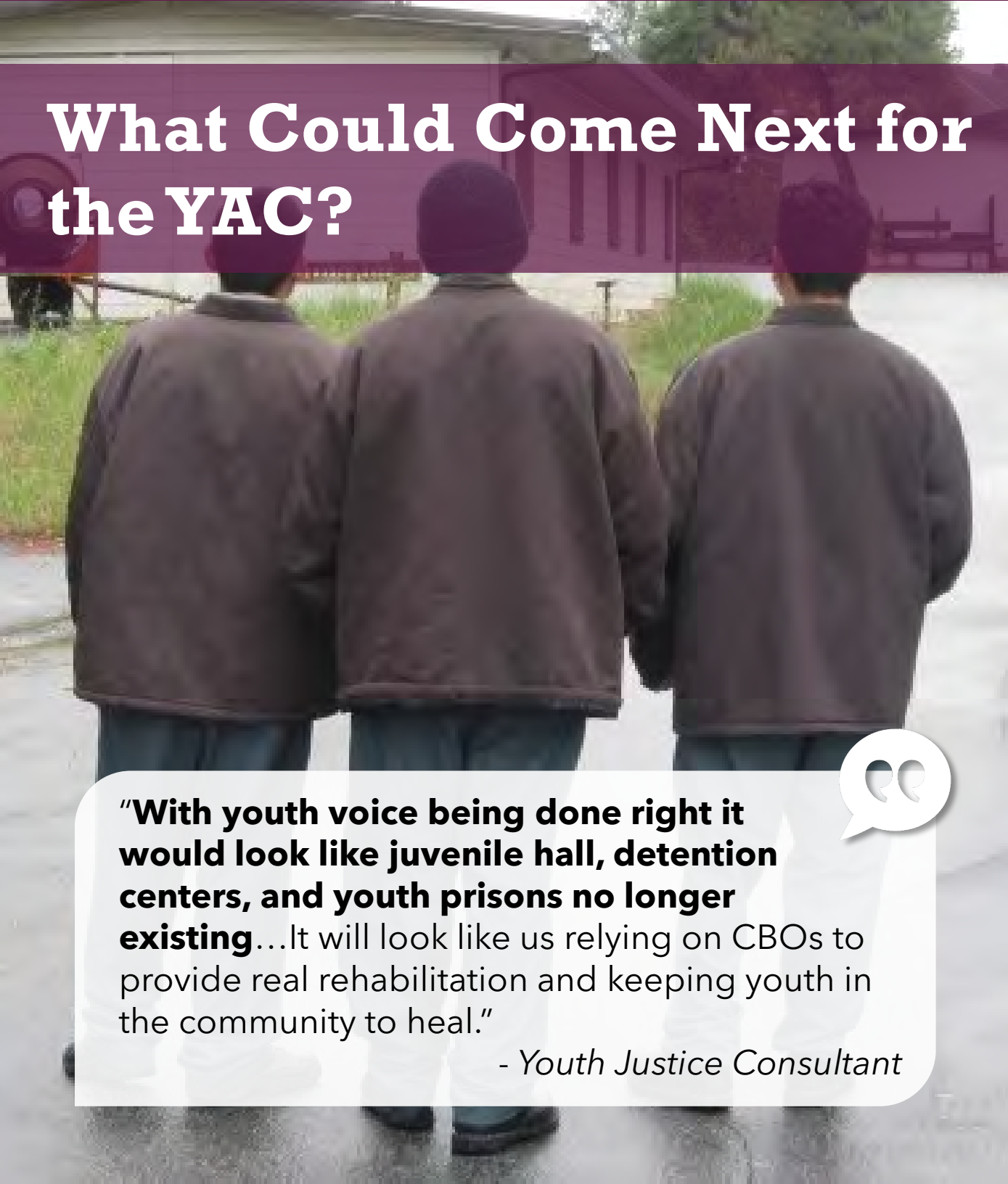
Managing time and setting up early wins. Since its founding, the services of the YAC have been in high demand. Youth Justice Consultants and YAC Coordinators have been thoughtful about what they say 'no' to in order to prevent overextension, as well as what they say 'yes' to in order to involve the YAC in opportunities that propel their work forward.

"We have been contacted by many organizations and some of the things they want us to do doesn't correlate with us. We find what is the best for us, and them."

- Youth Justice Consultant



What Could Come Next for the YAC?

A photograph of three young men from behind, walking away from the camera on a paved path. They are wearing brown jackets and dark pants. The background shows a grassy area and a building. The image is partially covered by a dark purple overlay at the top and a white speech bubble at the bottom left.

"With youth voice being done right it would look like juvenile hall, detention centers, and youth prisons no longer existing...It will look like us relying on CBOs to provide real rehabilitation and keeping youth in the community to heal."

- Youth Justice Consultant

Since its founding, the YAC has continued to evolve in response to current events, members' interests, and promising opportunities. As they gain more experience in collaborative system change work, the YAC and its partners have started to think about additional ways that the system could benefit from the expertise of Youth Justice Consultants. One obvious area is to expand training opportunities to additional system partners. Youth Justice Consultants have also expressed interest in doing more preventative work, such as collaborating with the education system to eradicate the school to prison pipeline.

"One of the [challenges] is figuring out...**how we engage with police officers, systemic racism, institutionalized racism, school to prison pipeline...Those are some of the goals in our future.**"

– Youth Justice Consultant


"I envision that all of us could tell them our story so that they understand when we tell [people in power] what we need. These policies that you've put in place work against me, they didn't work for me...**They need to share their power because what they have been doing hasn't been working.**"

– Youth Justice Consultant

"I wish we were a little more community-based and more in touch with the communities we are trying to support over here. **I see that happening in the next five years - working in prevention with youth who are at risk. Helping a youth out before they are incarcerated or system-involved.** I believe we can attain that in the near future."

– Youth Justice Consultant

Regardless of where the YAC chooses to focus their efforts in the future, they continue to prioritize the importance of thoughtfully bringing their lived experiences and perspectives to their work in a way that centers humanity and empathy in their efforts to improve the juvenile justice system for youth in Santa Clara County.



"I would like to co-create with other system partners to break the silos in how system partners work. **Youth deserve a holistic approach which means all of the systems working together. I envision youth being at the table in every system.**"

– Youth Justice Consultant

Appendices



"We just tend to overlook the brilliance and the insight that...young people have, not just in their own lives but in the world going on around them. We forget how truly aware and smart they are and how they absorb things and how they process all that information of things that are going on around them."

- External Stakeholder

- A. Youth Advisory Council Theory of Change
- B. Case Study Methods
- C. Acknowledgements

CASE STUDY METHODS AND APPROACH

FLY engaged [Learning for Action](#) (LFA), a professional third-party social sector evaluation, strategy, and capacity-building firm, to conduct the research for and develop this case study. LFA approached this work through an appreciative inquiry lens, inviting stakeholders to explore strengths, progress, and successes of the Youth Advisory Council, while at the same time identifying challenges and opportunities for improvement. LFA also approached the study with an aim of lifting up practice-based evidence, which values the lived experiences of implementers doing work on the ground, and equitable evaluation practices including partnering with FLY and Youth Advisory Council stakeholders in every stage of developing the case study, from early planning and preparation through data analysis and interpretation. As third-party evaluators, LFA maintained an impartial and objective lens through data collection and reporting.

LFA used a mixed-methods approach to data collection, including a combination of observation, field research, interviews, and focus groups. Stakeholders whose perspectives are included in this case study include: Youth Justice Consultants, YAC Coordinators (from both FLY and Probation), FLY staff, Probation Department staff, and external stakeholders who have been involved in various aspects of the juvenile justice system in Santa Clara County. Finally, to analyze and interpret the data, LFA engaged in co-sensemaking sessions with stakeholders including Youth Justice Consultants, YAC Coordinators, and FLY Staff, which strengthened the case study by leaning on the expertise of those who are implementing the work on the ground, while still maintaining objectivity.



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ABOUT LFA



Established in 2000, [Learning for Action](#) is headquartered in San Francisco, California. LFA's mission is to partner with social sector organizations to advance knowledge, capacity, and a culture of learning in the service of equity and justice. LFA's technical expertise and community-based experience ensure that the insights and information we deliver to nonprofits, foundations, and public agencies can be put directly into action. We aim to support structural change that addresses the underlying root causes of inequities so that all members of our communities have access to the opportunities that everyone deserves.

ABOUT FLY



Founded in 2000, Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY) is an award-winning nonprofit serving Bay Area youth in the juvenile justice system and those at risk. Our vision is for a country where all kids grow up valued and supported, and the pipeline to prison is replaced with meaningful opportunities for kids to live healthy, free, and productive lives. We educate our young people about the law and their rights, give them positive mentors and role models, and support them to become leaders in their communities and to use their voices for change.

Learn more about FLY: <https://flyprogram.org/about/>

Read about FLY programs and how to refer youth: <https://flyprogram.org/our-programs/>

Ask a question: info@flyprogram.org