

## Sustaining Youth Voice as Critical to an SOC Community as Its Financing

By **Raphaelle Richardson Alexander**

Youth voice and youth engagement are vital components to creating an enhanced system of care, in accordance with SOC philosophy. As youth transition from youth advocates to advocates for youth and into new stages in life, the opportunity to pass on leadership skills is necessary for continuity of youth voice. To ensure that youth voice is not a short-term product, but instead a long-term practice, sustaining youth voice must be addressed from the beginning. As youth leaders age and move on to other things, communities need to focus on bringing in the next generation so that there is not a gap in developing the next cohort of youth. The more continuous this flow, the stronger the sustainability of that youth voice will be.

I can remember my own introduction to the system of care community in 2005. After being hired as what is now a youth engagement specialist, and after a brief job orientation, I was told, “you’ll have to figure out the rest.” This left me feeling anxious to strategize and conquer the challenge, excited to exercise my gifts and talents, and confused as to how I would accomplish such a task within the short time remaining in the grant. Over the next eight years, I would indeed figure out the rest, gaining experience at local, statewide, national, and international levels that produced many valuable lessons in leadership, a rich community of support, and an arsenal of sustainability strategies.

Such leadership experience goes a long way toward sustaining youth voice. Developing youth leaders and building youth-led organizations within system of care grantee communities relies on SOC leadership to allocate time, organizational resources, and funding to the leadership development of youth advocates and advocates for youth. “Youth advocates” are defined as young people between the ages of 15 and 25 who utilize their own lived experience to educate, inform, motivate, and inspire others in an effort to create positive systems change. “Advocates for youth” are defined as young adults between the ages of 25 and 35 who have transitioned from a youth advocate role into one where they advocate for youth involvement across individual, program, and system levels.

Youth MOVE (Motivating Others through Voices of Experience) National provides shared events, experiences, mentorship, and leadership development opportunities through its Generation NEXT program. With its goal of modeling authentic youth-adult partnerships, Generation NEXT employs an “each one teach one” philosophy by connecting youth advocates

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and advocates for youth to a community of support comprised of advisors, teachers, and encouragers from previous generations. In my experience as a youth engagement specialist, this support made the difference between successful sustainability and a return to business as usual. By developing young leaders who have the capacity to support the passing of information and skills to future leaders through strong mentorship and peer relationships, a youth organization ensures its ability to sustain youth voice across many generations of youth advocates.

The history of Youth MOVE is saturated with supportive adults who believed in the mission, cared about the young people behind the vision, insisted youth voice be represented throughout the decision-making process, and helped staff and the board of directors navigate unfamiliar situations. Youth-adult partnerships offer a return on investment for both parties, producing a rich, unique experience, creative solutions, and continuity in leadership. Often, these relationships return a higher sense of purpose, reuniting adults with a sense of passion for their work, while validating the unadulterated enthusiasm of youth and making professional goals more apparent. Together, youth and adults offer SOC grantee communities intergenerational leadership and creative energy to solve critical issues of today and tomorrow.

Sustaining youth voice might seem like a vague goal; its progress and success can appear difficult to measure, while securing additional funds and maintaining program goals at-large can be a daunting task. Some key tasks that help develop and sustain youth voice include developing a youth-led youth advisory group; developing a logic model and strategic plan for youth involvement; and ensuring youth voice is an integral part of the overall community logic model, strategic plan, and governance. The connection between “what we do,” “why funding is important,” and “how we sustain progress” emerges into your sustainability plan for youth voice. Youth MOVE National can help in implementing this practice across systems, communities, and organizations and offers webinars and resources to assist with this.

Eight years have passed since my introduction to the system of care community. From my experiences, I have four takeaway messages for other leaders committed to sustaining youth voice and leadership:

1. Start with the end in mind. What are you hoping to achieve? Aim to connect your purpose and youth activities to a measurable plan. The plan could be a sustainability

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plan, strategic plan, marketing plan, or fundraising plan; it is important to ensure that this plan is mission driven, includes sustainability strategies, and has measurable goals.

2. Communicate your goals, needs, accomplishments, and limitations to key partners (i.e., youth, administrators, legislators, etc.), supports, and your community. Remember, individuals are unable to support a project or activity if they are unaware.
3. Take time to learn the different aspects and functions of your SOC grantee community, and develop relationships with local and national grant partners: social marketers, evaluators, clinicians, governance board members, technical assistance coordinators, key community partners, youth advocates, advocates for youth, and supportive adults. Broad perspective enhances and informs leadership style, decision making, and the sustainability plan.
4. Engage in win-win partnerships and projects with other community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, local schools, fraternities, sororities, social clubs, and businesses. A good rapport with individuals outside of your grant community will greatly benefit your sustainability efforts.

Youth voice is vital to ensuring positive and effective outcomes for young people. When youth and adults partner effectively at all levels of an organization or community, outcomes improve, and the return on investment over time benefits all. Building and sustaining youth voice is the job of everyone, from administration and governance to youth groups and youth engagement coordinators. It is necessary to invest energy up front in building youth voice into your work, but if sustained properly, the reward is having well-developed youth partners who can help ensure better outcomes for the next generation. And isn't that what we are all here for?

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