



Of the Youth, For the Youth, By the Youth



A Governor's Guide for Incorporating Youth Voice into Policymaking

As states and territories across the country work to [address the challenges that many youth face related to their mental health and wellbeing](#), Governors can engage youth themselves to drive meaningful policy change in their states. Perspectives from youth regarding on-the-ground program gaps, in-school experiences, and program and service delivery preferences can help states make practical improvements that make their programs and policies more effective. Meanwhile, direct engagement with youth allows Governors to tap into a new and excited constituency, youth and young adults, who are actively seeking to affect change and improvements to the systems around them.

This report serves as a practical roadmap for leaders, providing actionable best practices for incorporating youth voice into policymaking, particularly related to youth mental health. Compiled from lessons learned across the 2024 National Governors Association (NGA) Policy Academy to Drive Thriving Youth Mental Health, where states embedded youth advisors directly into their project teams, this report outlines strategic frameworks and recommendations for recruitment, operational best practices and compensation considerations – all designed to help Governors and their teams build sustainable, meaningful partnerships with youth to inform better mental health policies that improve state and territory outcomes.

Contents

Background.....	3
Report Methodology	4
NGA's 2024 Policy Academy.....	5
Section 1: Framework for Engagement – A View Across States and Territories	6
Section 2: Building Engagement Structures – Strategic Recruitment	8
Section 3: Operations—Fostering and Maintaining Meaningful Engagement.....	10
Section 4: Compensation – Providing Value in Exchange for Insight.....	16
Conclusion	18
Background	3
Section 1: Framework for Engagement – A View Across States and Territories	6
Section 2: Building Engagement Structures – Strategic Recruitment.....	8
Section 3: Operations—Fostering and Maintaining Meaningful Engagement.....	10
Section 4: Compensation – Providing Value in Exchange for Insight	16
Conclusion.....	18
Appendix	19

Background

The 2024 NGA Policy Academy to Drive Thriving Youth Mental Health (Youth Mental Health Policy Academy) kicked off in March 2024, following the completion of the 2023-2024 NGA Chair's Initiative led by former NGA Chair New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy on [Strengthening Youth Mental Health](#). Over the course of the year, NGA supported six states (Alabama, Hawai'i, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Virginia and New Jersey) working to implement the best practices detailed in the NGA publication "[Governor's Playbook on Strengthening Youth Mental Health](#)" released as part of the Chair's Initiative, which included policy solutions to address the unique needs of their diverse youth mental health systems.

While this policy academy focused on supporting Governors' offices in tackling issues *for* youth, a critical factor of the project was to support Governors in tackling these issues *with* youth. As part of his NGA Chair's Initiative, Governor Murphy prioritized the inclusion of youth voice in all aspects of the Initiative's work, ensuring that youth actively participated in each of the Initiative's events – seated at the same table as Governors at each roundtable – and including their voices and perspectives in the development of a [Governor's Playbook](#) publication. As part of Governor Murphy's initiative, several roundtable discussions were held across the country. Each roundtable featured discussion specifically aimed at youth and featured youth as equal participants in the policy conversations, which set the tone about the significance of their contributions. The 2024 Youth Mental Health Policy Academy continued this priority by embedding youth advisors directly into the state teams to contribute their own lived expertise and ideas into each state's project implementation.

This report provides state and territory leaders with actionable best practices for how to incorporate youth voice successfully into their policymaking conversations, especially in youth mental health. These recommendations are sourced from the NGA youth advisors and state team leaders and provide tactical and practical advice for any state or territory to employ. Quotes in this report were provided by NGA youth advisors, but names are not included to protect their privacy and maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Methodology

For the 2024 Youth Mental Health Policy Academy, NGA required that participating state teams include at least one youth advisor to walk alongside team members in their efforts. To facilitate this objective, NGA supported the compensation and expenses of one youth advisor for each of the teams. Project teams selected their own youth advisor, who participated in state team planning as well as NGA-facilitated convenings (monthly technical assistance check-ins, bimonthly peer state learning calls and in-person site visits). Youth advisors also engaged with their peer-youth advisors from other states through an NGA-hosted Youth Advisory Council (YAC).

To accommodate peer learning and cultivate a safe space for the youth advisors participating in this project, NGA stood up the Youth Advisory Council to mirror the peer learning spaces available to the larger state team cohort. The Youth Advisory Council included each policy academy states' Youth Advisor and entailed quarterly meetings of the council to facilitate peer-sharing and knowledge-building. Focusing Youth Advisory Council meetings on emerging policy topics in youth mental health allowed NGA to not only support youth advisors in building their own expertise in the policy space but also afforded NGA access to direct insights and feedback into the youths' experience working directly with the state teams.

Topics and speakers included:

- **Effective Storytelling, featuring [Young Invincibles](#)** - Leaning on youth advisors' backgrounds and/or interest in advocacy, this call centered around strategies to craft persuasive messaging and communications to influence change.
- **Introduction to Youth Mental Health Policy, featuring the Bipartisan Policy Center** - Delving into the difference between the role of federal and state and territory government in policy-making, the Youth Advisory Council explored key federal funding streams and regulatory statutes that shape the youth mental health policy landscape.
- **Career and Personal Development, featuring the Pennsylvania Commission on Next Generation Engagement** - To support youths' experience with the Youth Advisory Council as an investment that leverages their lived expertise *and* growth, youth advisors learned about networking and professional development strategies to accelerate a career in policy.

The Youth Advisory Council was supported by the expertise of [Young Invincibles](#), an organization working to amplify the voices of young adults in the political process and expand economic opportunity for the new generation. Throughout the course of the Policy Academy, [Young Invincibles](#) provided recommendations about best practices to both NGA and Policy Academy cohort states. The Youth Advisory Council and participation of youth advisors in the Policy Academy constituted one of the first formal efforts to embed youth voice into NGA's delivery of long-term technical assistance, and YI's support and expertise was critical to developing the framework for engagement.

NGA's 2024 Youth Mental Health Policy Academy

The 2024 NGA Youth Mental Health Policy Academy was a continuation of the work first brought to life by the [2022-2023 Chair's Initiative on Strengthening Youth Mental Health](#), led by former NGA Chair New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy. NGA's policy academy project model affords Governors the opportunity to convene a multidisciplinary cross-agency team to receive in-depth technical assistance and facilitation support to execute a state-determined proposed scope of work and engage in multiple virtual and in-person peer learning opportunities. The six state teams participating in the policy academy met monthly with NGA facilitators, as well as bimonthly with the entire cohort, pairing state teams with peer states, experts and organizations supporting youth mental health policy improvements. Teams also attended two in-person meetings: a kickoff event in Charleston, South Carolina, and a state and territory symposium on youth mental health in Fort Myers, Florida. More information about the process and outcomes from the Policy Academy can be found in the forthcoming final report.

State staff recommendations are indicated with a purple star. ★

This report, and successes resulting from the 2024 YMH Policy Academy, would not have been possible without the expertise of our youth advisors: Oliver, Spandana, Reagan, Tianna, Tiffany, Jack, Ekansha, and Braylea. We are so thankful for the experience to work with and learn from you. We're also grateful to the state participants and team leads who dedicated their time to drive progress in youth mental health and demonstrated leadership and innovation over the course of the project.

Section 1: Framework for Engagement – A View Across States and Territories

State and territory leaders have many different models¹ for youth engagement at their disposal, depending on needs, goals, and staff capacity. States vary in how they engage youth, and leaders can exercise creativity in design, scope and leadership of the structure. Some of the considerations for youth engagement models include:

Councils or Consultants:

- Youth councils are typically comprised of more than five youth and are charged with consolidating and aligning feedback from a diverse set of perspectives.
- Youth consultancy programs typically involve one or two youth providing more intensive feedback on a specific issue or project.
- Youth councils help states collect feedback from a multitude of perspectives, while youth consultants can provide in-depth insights and be involved from program ideation to implementation.

Scope:

- Some youth councils have a predetermined specific charter that defines the focus and outcomes of feedback supplied by youth. Such scope may be broader (e.g., “youth mental health”) or narrower (e.g., “school-based youth mental health services”) depending on the construct.
- Additionally, states maintain youth councils that operate without predetermined policy goals and instead allow the youth advisors to provide feedback on an array of issues such as climate change, workforce and education.

Governor or Agency-led:

- Most states and territories have some type of youth engagement structure already, such as a child-welfare focus group within the family-serving agency. By having agencies lead youth engagement, states drill down into agency-specific policies or populations and capitalize on existing relationships youth may have with agency staff.
- Some states have the Governor's Office lead youth engagement directly, which can provide a clearer line of sight to top “decision-makers” in the state.

¹ For more information on the landscape of youth councils, see Appendix.

Select State Examples

Mississippi: The Mississippi [State Superintendent Student Advisory Council](#) lives within the Department of Education and includes students in grades 11-12. The goal of the Committee is to build a bridge between the Department of Education and public-school students.



MISSISSIPPI
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

New Jersey: [The Office of Family Voice](#) within the NJ Department of Children and Families operates a Youth Council, which was created in 2020 and is comprised of 24 youth ages 14-23. The council has several goals, including developing recommendations for the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and educating parents, judges and community members about issues of importance to youth involved with DCF.



Pennsylvania: In June 2023, Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro created the Commission on Next Generation Engagement through [E.O. 2023-14](#). The Commission is comprised of 30 constituents between the ages 16-26 and advises the Governor on a broad swath of issues, including mental health, voter engagement and education.



Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro meets with the Governor's Commission on Next Generation Engagement

Section 2: Building Engagement Structures – Strategic Recruitment

By taking a deliberate approach to recruitment, state and territory leaders can ensure they have compiled myriad youth perspectives from different walks of life. This variety in perspectives contributes to a stronger system that can pressure-check policy solutions.

NGA youth advisors provided the following recommendations about getting youth involved in these programs, and they emphasized the importance of recruiting advisors outside of the “A+ student, class president” mold, especially when seeking insight on youth mental health policy.

Leverage existing state, territory and community networks to cast a wide net

NGA advisors said many of them were originally connected to the NGA project through another organization they were involved in, such as a student roundtable, community-based organization or an agency council. Organizations closer to the ground, like child welfare agencies or community providers, likely already have established relationships with youth with lived expertise and make for helpful recruitment scouts. One of the most efficient ways for executive leaders to enlist youth with lived expertise is to assess which facets of the government are already working with youth and then charge those teams with recruiting participants.

Meet youth where they are, both in-person and online

Disseminating communications and awareness materials into the spaces where young people are present, both physically and digitally, is an effective recruitment strategy. NGA advisors reinforced the belief that the majority of youth have an online presence on applications like Instagram or TikTok, and that they're more likely to see messaging about these opportunities on social media than anywhere else. States and territories can leverage existing social media channels to push out information about opportunities for young people.

Interestingly, physical spaces are still just as relevant, and youth advisors reported that recruiting youth in the physical places they inhabit, namely schools, libraries and community centers, continues to be advantageous. Government actors should be encouraged to look to schools or other outlets which may host student clubs or youth organizations focused on mental health and well-being, which can distribute promotional materials about opportunities to serve on councils.

Break the mold of the “ideal candidate”

One of the most common pitfalls is the “intern trap,” where access to opportunities, like advisory or council positions, are offered first or exclusively to young people who are already “in the room,” like interns who are already placed within government positions/offices. Young people who are already involved in government tend to be ambitious and motivated, which can be a helpful trait for policy-making conversations, but state and territory leaders should reflect on their goals for youth engagement and aim to recruit youth most impacted by government programs and services, which may not be the same youth who have already secured highly competitive internships.

Advertise additional participation benefits and professional development

Engagement opportunities can provide a valuable chance for youth to develop personal and professional skills. By framing youth advisory roles as skill-building opportunities, states and territories can create mutually beneficial arrangements that both improve policies and prepare young people for future careers in public service or advocacy. State and territory leaders can foster these skills and formalize trainings or resources that cultivate advisors' expertise, such as resume workshops, networking events with state and territory leaders, public speaking training, and policy education.

NGA advisors shared that state and territory staff can help young people add volunteer or advisory work on their resumes, noting young people may need assistance in translating their participation and role into a portfolio, CV, resume, or college or job application. NGA advisors also reflected on how individual state or territory staff can offer access to their personal networks, like facilitating connections to national organizations, sharing internship opportunities or writing recommendation letters as a value-add for youth.

Section 3: Operations—Fostering and Maintaining Meaningful Engagement

"It can be frustrating for youth to feel like their suggestions are not taken seriously. Youth may not know whether or not their suggestions are politically or administratively feasible."

Cultivate Trust

Trust is a foundational element for developing any kind of partnership, especially when establishing a relationship between youth and staff, and is key to cultivating genuine perspectives and feedback. Taking deliberate efforts to foster an environment that upholds a culture of trust encourages honesty and transparency for feedback and problem-solving that are essential to a comprehensive policy-development process.

Invest in building strong relationships between staff and youth advisors

The quality of relationships between council or commission members can determine young people's willingness to provide honest feedback. States can foster these connections through team-building activities, informal check-ins, and conversations beyond immediate policy tasks. NGA advisors highlighted relationship quality as a key factor in their authentic participation and appreciated adults who made a genuine effort to connect, like asking about their days or interests outside of youth mental health. These relationships help youth advisors feel like they're valued as partners, rather than subordinates.

Provide clear and honest expectations about role, commitment, timeline, scope of feedback and project context

A common pitfall of youth engagement is related to managing expectations and over-promising outcomes; by nature of their age, youth advisors may have had limited working experience, and government bureaucracy can feel especially confusing or slow to a lay audience. State and territory leaders are encouraged to be proactive in their development and communication of clear guidance about the parameters of youth consultant roles and structures, such as clarity around time commitment, project context, expected outcomes, and how insights, perspectives and feedback offered by youth will ultimately be used. State and territory advisors should provide a concrete vision of what the youth's feedback will produce while also delineating clear context about 1) why the state or territory is looking for

feedback, 2) what kind of feedback the state or territory is seeking, and 3) what youth are expected to bring to the table.

Staff can further mitigate disappointment or misaligned expectations by explaining the decision-making process and sharing upfront insights into potential hurdles, both political and procedural, that the project may encounter.

★ **Anticipate potential tension on policy issues/strategies**

Youth advisors lamented previous experiences where feedback and solutions they offered to address system failures was met with an immediate “no,” or where adults were quick to present explanations about the impossibility of change rather than explore solutions; such dismissals can easily yield frustration and disillusionment. While state and territory leaders may be well aware of the gaps, realities and shortcomings of operating statewide systems, youth advisors may not fully understand the existing barriers, like funding, regulations, or political will, that can hamper progress. States can mitigate this tension by upholding and maintaining a culture of respect at group meetings, and model comportment that prioritizes curiosity and openness to problem-solving over criticism and defensiveness to undertake open and honest communication channels with youth advisors about what is and is not possible.

“Youth councils are going to ‘say it how it is’ based their experience, and it’s a different perspective that you can’t get from professional experience. You may have youth that have been involved with different parts of a system longer than certain policymakers have been in office.”

★ **Assign dedicated staff that have a balance of leadership and capacity**

Finding a staff member who has the capacity, bandwidth and jurisdiction to lead can be a critical key to success. Both youth advisors and state and territory leaders endorsed the best practice of maintaining consistent, dedicated staff on the project team to work with youth advisors. Trusted “adult allies” that youth could connect with and count on to be present was important to building confidence and buy-in from all participants. Furthermore, employing creative strategies to establish a line of sight for youth to decision-makers, like hosting an annual meeting between youth advisors and the Governor (or a Governor’s designee) or establishing expectations that leadership attend a pre-determined number of meetings helps maintain commitment to the project.

Mitigate Tokenism

"It's critical to have meaningful student voice rather than superficial student voice – it can 'look good' to have a board or have a council but there needs to be accountability at the end of the year."

A common critique of community engagement entails feedback mechanisms perpetuating "tokenism," which has been [described](#) as the illusion of "inclusion and participation in decision-making processes without giving people real influence or power." NGA youth advisors, reflecting on prior experiences, described the feeling that leaders wanted to create the superficial *perception* of including youth "lived experience" voice for a political win. Tokenization can be created through a series of small, unintentional or consecutive decisions by leaders, and states and territories looking to develop effective youth engagement structures should consider the following lessons learned:

Ensure youth councils, or components of the council, are led by youth whenever possible

Youth advisors reported that the presence of peer leadership made their youth peers more comfortable sharing honest opinions and helped boost perceptions of youth as genuine partners in identifying solutions. Moreover, helping youth develop leadership skills through training and mentorship can foster more dynamic engagement among youth advisors while also cultivating a young person's capacity to lead, such as by affording youth the opportunity to chair meetings, set agendas, or lead specific workstreams. Across the board, testimony from NGA youth advisors affirmed that youth are hungry for opportunities to flex their leadership skills in service to these initiatives.

Heed unintentional tokenization

State and territory leaders or other adults can unintentionally create situations that demean or disrespect young people's participation, such as alienating youth or inviting them into conversation only on superficial or inconsequential matters.

Many of the NGA youth advisors shared, upon reflecting about their own previous experiences and those of their peers, that one of the most pervasive negative feelings associated with government engagement efforts is that decisions are "made by the adults" after the youth have left the room, which can leave youth feeling, as one advisor reported, excluded and patronized. NGA youth advisors reflected that while it often does not represent a deliberate act of malice, the action still unintentionally sidelines youth voice. Transparency about which meetings youth *will and will not* attend, providing context about decisions made elsewhere

and creating appropriate opportunities for input before decisions are finalized can help reduce the perception that youth are removed from the room before the real work can start.

“Tokenization is difficult to avoid if you’re not thinking about it – state leaders need to rewire their thinking, asking questions like: ‘Am I checking on the youth? Are people passively or actively including the youth?’”

Invite youth directly into the conversation

In scenarios where there are more adults than youth participating in conversations, power dynamics can prove difficult to maneuver, contributing to intimidation or other barriers that make it difficult for youth to share thoughts, opinions and feedback. NGA youth advisors reported their appreciation for actions that their Policy Academy team leads would make to explicitly invite them into the conversation: Efforts like deliberately and directly asking in group meetings for youths to contribute were particularly noted and served to model continued expectations for other group members. High-profile or leadership staff following this best practice will establish and reinforce expectations that leadership seeks and values hearing directly from youth.

Prioritize youths' expertise, not their trauma

Taking a deliberate and sensitive approach to **how** and **when** young people are asked to tell their story can help promote a culture of meaningful contributions. Certainly, real stories of youths' experience help to humanize the issues that government is addressing and contextualize the actual policy issues at hand. Many of the NGA youth advisors reflected on the strategic impact their stories can have on policy decisions; however, they also reported that it's not uncommon for their stories to be deployed by government actors for shock value, which can exacerbate the perception that a youth's *only* asset and/or contribution is their trauma. Asking youth to relitigate or relive what are often traumatic experiences, while at the same time withholding opportunities to partake in solutions-oriented conversations, erodes their trust in public systems. To avoid this, government leaders should be judicious in their efforts to ensure youth that share their lived experience perspectives also have a role in shaping reform efforts, including by contributing opinions on systems and services whenever possible. Leaders can take care to work with young people to affirm their comfortability and emotional safety and to establish trust between the two parties.

Balance Practicality with Reality

NGA youth advisors shared a number of practical implementation suggestions for state and territories.

Be creative with one-off or low-lift models of engagement

Time-limited options like roundtables, focus groups, surveys, or digital campaigns can reach youth who cannot commit to regular participation. Broader discussions, like student-focused roundtables, can involve youth who may be hesitant to discuss intimate issues, like mental health. When reflecting on their personal trajectories, NGA advisors shared how they initially got involved in government: joining a lived experience focus group, attending a student roundtable, or joining a club at school. These stories represent the diverse ways that states and territories can engage youth beyond formal councils or commissions.

Provide resources and trainings to help youth understand policy, terminology, and systems

The “alphabet soup” of acronyms for funding streams, programs, regulations, or organizations can be challenging for even the most informed policy wonk to decode. The language of policy may present a barrier to entry for youth advisors when they are exploring policy for the first time. Helping youth advisors understand the basics of things like federal funding, state/territory and federal jurisdictions, key regulation and “hot topics” can be accomplished by providing terminology glossaries, policy summaries, or explanations of government structures to ease policy language barriers.

“Youth advisors face gaps in understanding certain policies – it can be hard getting up to speed, and they can feel lost if they don’t understand what’s going on. States should take efforts get the youth up to speed on critical policies and terminology”

Be flexible when scheduling around school, and help youth balance other commitments

Youth face unique scheduling constraints due to school, extracurricular activities, jobs and family responsibilities. States can increase participation by scheduling meetings outside of school hours, providing sufficient advanced notice, or offering hybrid or recorded sessions for later viewing. Should youth be unable to attend a few meetings, state and territory staff should develop an attendance structure that allows for an occasional absence while adhering to the core expectations of the project. Successful practices include surveying youth about availability, frontloading key discussions and creating multiple participation pathways with varying time commitments.

★ **Center patience and understanding**

When youth advisors are asked to give their own testimony or provide feedback based on their own experiences, they may have to navigate how their past trauma or experiences affects their ability to engage in policy projects. Effective youth engagement requires patience and a recognition that youth are developing professional skills while navigating complex issues that can be emotionally taxing. Youth may need more time to process information or establish a sense of safety in formal settings, which might be particularly sensitive or challenging when exploring issues related to child welfare, mental health, or juvenile justice systems. A supportive, collaborative and kind environment can yield a safer space for brainstorming on policy outcomes.

★ **Employ more than one youth advisor, even if following a consultancy model**

Both state and territory leaders and youth advisors participating in the NGA Policy Academy recommended teams have more than one youth advisor. Employing at least two youth advisors can make them feel more comfortable sharing their insight and thoughts in a conversation. NGA youth advisors shared that they relied on their peers for moral and intellectual support, and this arrangement alleviated the pressure to speak for an entire generation. Like full-time staff, youth advisors may need to unexpectedly withdraw from participating for reasons like family emergencies or school obligations and employing more than one advisor can be critical for continuity.

★ **Partner with an intermediary organization to manage administrative and logistical responsibilities**

Partnering with intermediary organizations can provide an effective alternative pathway when state and territory systems make it difficult to develop a youth council or compensate youth involved. Community-based organizations, foundations or universities often have more flexible administrative processes and established relationships with youth populations, with the added benefit of also having valuable expertise in youth engagement. These partnerships can help states navigate logistical challenges related to youth compensation, transportation coordination, and administrative processes. For example, some states in the NGA Policy Academy leveraged relationships with local youth-serving nonprofits to manage stipends and transportation reimbursements. By building these partnerships, states can maintain their leadership role in the policy development process while benefiting from the administrative flexibility and youth engagement expertise of partner organizations.

Section 4: Compensation – Providing Value in Exchange for Insight

Before launching youth engagement initiatives, state and territory leaders should meet with their human resources and procurement staff to thoroughly assess the administrative implications of various ways of compensating youth. Compensation can pose budget and capacity complications and create issues related to taxes, family and individual benefit eligibility and payment processing can present hidden complexities.

Participation in a youth council or government youth advisory role may entail a youth's first, or early, professional experience, and they may be unfamiliar with processes or concepts career professionals take for granted, under an assumption of common knowledge. Offering assistance in submitting reimbursement and expense reports, as well as guidance and tutorials regarding invoicing, reimbursements, and disbursements, may be required depending on the age and life experiences of youth participants.

Reflect on organizational structure/administrative rules

Guiding questions to consider around compensation structures for youth engagement:

- What payment or compensation mechanisms are available in my state/territory and what are the associated human resources implications of such mechanisms?
 - E.g., can youth advisors be paid via honorarium? What compensation methods (checks, gift cards, tuition support) are available and which are prohibited?
- How may compensation impact the target demographic?
- How will the state or territory support youth in understanding their compensation obligations?
- What are the tax implications for the state or territory and for the recipient?
- Are there any community or national organizations available to partner that can more easily navigate providing compensation?

Pay youth advisors via check, if possible

Across all youth advisors engaged in the Policy Academy, payment by check was far and away the preferred form of compensation. As opposed to gift cards or tuition support, advisors reported appreciation for the ability to apply their compensation in the way that matched their own individual needs, whether that was covering school and tuition costs, or basic needs such as rent and groceries.

Explore alternative compensation options, like gift cards, tuition support, or technology

Gift cards, tuition support, technology stipends or professional development opportunities can all serve as meaningful alternative forms of compensation when direct payment may complicate a youth's eligibility for benefits or be a challenge given a state's financial regulations. Additionally, states may offer educational stipends that contribute to college savings accounts or provide physical technology that supports youth advisors' academic or professional pursuits. For example, the **Maryland Youth Advisory Council** under the [Governor's Office for Children](#) offers service learning hours for council members.

These alternatives not only recognize youth contributions but may also help overcome some administrative hurdles that arise with traditional employment arrangements.

Provide transportation support/mileage reimbursement

Youth advisors identified transportation limitations as a primary reason peers declined participation opportunities. It can be especially difficult for youth in suburban or rural areas of the state or territory to travel into urban settings, where most government offices are located. State and territory leaders can mitigate this barrier by providing transportation support through mileage reimbursement, rideshare credits, public transit passes or coordinated carpooling.

Conclusion

“These youth are going to go on to be people that share their story forever and fill in jobs in the state. The current system will turn over, and we will have people being guided by their lived experience – these youth are the future. They’re going to be our next generation of social workers, therapists, doctors, lawyers, community leaders, and Governors. It’s important to hear their perspective now.”

Meaningful youth engagement is not merely a checkbox for state and territory governments but a strategic imperative that enhances how policies are developed and implemented. When youth are treated as valued partners and architects rather than passive recipients of policy, the resulting initiatives and efforts are more likely to be responsive and better received by the populations that use them. Moreover, youth engagement is an investment in both the present and the future – affording youth advisors the opportunity to influence and improve the systems that exist to support their needs, as well as empowering them to continue to engage and develop their civic systems tomorrow. When enacted purposefully, effective youth engagement can inspire meaningful improvements and enhanced outcomes by leveraging lived experience and expertise and also strengthen the connection between government and the populations it serves.

Through these frameworks, Governors can leverage these best practices to inform their engagement efforts and ground their policy in the real, lived experience of the experts they seek to aid – the youth themselves. As Governors seek to foster solutions to the challenges faced by their constituents, the National Governors Association stands ready to aid state and territory leaders in continued efforts to embed and engage youth as valued partners in policymaking.

Appendix

NGA compiled the following spreadsheet as part of the 2024 Policy Academy, which catalogues criteria and parameters across state- and territory-level youth councils active as of June 2024.

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
American Samoa	Housed in agency for administrative purposes, but advises Governor	Broad		Appointed by high school principals; appointed by College President; appointed by Governor	Two students (one male, one female) aged 16-22 from each public and private high school; one student from American Samoa Community College aged 16-30; Six members, two from each district, aged 16-30	Meet at least monthly, express the concerns of youth and children, make recommendations for policies and programs to address the needs of youth, review and make recommendations for legislation, encourage and foster local community action	No mention
Arizona	Governor’s Office	Broad	5 policy workgroups: Distracted driving, domestic violence, education, mental health, substance abuse	Online or mail-in form	40-50 high school students, with 2-3 students from each county	Attend Quarterly Commission Meetings per year, including Orientation, attend Workgroup meetings on a bi-weekly basis, perform at least 5 service hours per month (August through April) and solicit at least two peers to join in conducting service hours, and adhere to the code of conduct	No mention, but can be reimbursed if traveling from 5 miles outside of Maricopa County

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Arkansas	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No mention	Current and former foster youth aged 16 to 21	Act as peer supporter to current foster youth; advise DCFS on policies and programs	No mention
California	Agency	Specific	Education	Online application	Public high school students aged 15 to 18	No mention	No mention
California	Agency	Broad	Gender equality	Online application	Youth aged 12-19	Attend six meetings per year, support the Commission on the Status of Women and Girls, comply with Open Meetings Act requirements, serve as a youth ambassador, advise and proactively make recommendations that affect young women in their geographical area, adhere to charter and handbook	No mention

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Colorado	Agency	Specific	Workforce development	Online application	Youth aged 16 to 26	Quarterly meetings to advance employers creating welcoming spaces for youth, promoting behavioral and mental health supports for workplace success, and supporting apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeships for youth	No mention
Connecticut	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No mention	No mention	No mention	No mention
Connecticut	Agency	Specific	Special education	Schools/districts sign up and choose their student representatives	Middle and high school students with disabilities	Meet three to four times during a school year	No mention
Connecticut	Agency	Specific	Education/secondary transition	Students can apply themselves or be referred through contact with the CT Parent Advocacy Center	Youth with disabilities aged 14 to 26	Flexible participation; monthly virtual meetings	No mention

**Of the Youth, For the Youth, By the Youth:
A Governor's Guide for Incorporating Youth Voice into Policymaking**

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Delaware	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	The advisory council meetings are open to all current and former foster youth aged 14 to 23; youth apply to be one of three officers	Current and former foster youth aged 14 to 23	Attend monthly meetings; engagement with peers and other professionals through a variety of forums; advising on system improvements	Transportation and meals are provided at meetings
Georgia	Agency	Specific	Education	Application online on State DOE website or through their school	Students in grades 10 through 12	Meet four times a year with the State Superintendent, serve as ambassadors to their schools, participate in service projects	Students who live more than 50 miles away from meeting locations provided overnight lodging
Georgia	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No mention	Youth aged 16 to 26 who were in foster care after age 14	No mention	No mention
Guam	Governor's Office	Broad	Including but not limited to 3 topic areas: Civic engagement, education, youth violence	Appointed by the Governor	Student body presidents from every high school, college, and university in Guam	Meet four times per year, make recommendations to the Governor	No compensation
Hawaii	Housed in agency for administrative purposes, but advises Governor and Legislature	Broad		Appointed by Governor, Senate President, and Speaker of the House	15 members aged 14 to 24	Serve one two-year term, respond to requests for comment or recommendation, conduct research and community outreach, report annually to Governor and Legislature	No mention

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Illinois	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No application	Youth aged 14 to 21 currently or previously in foster care	Open membership with a variety of more targeted/intensive engagement	No mention
Illinois	Agency	Specific	Education	Online application	20 students	Serve for one school year; monthly virtual meetings and one in-person meeting each year	No mention
Indiana	Agency	Specific	Public health, mental health, and suicide prevention initiatives	Online application	Youth aged 14 to 24	Serve one year term, dedicate 5 to 10 hours per month, attend two virtual meetings months, one in-person event annually, support additional projects that interest them and improve mental health and wellbeing	\$20 per hour
Iowa	Housed in agency for administrative purposes, but advises Governor	Broad		Online application	21 lowans aged 14 to 20	Serve for two-year term; meet in person quarterly and virtually biweekly; conduct research, draft documents and resources, and advocate to the Governor, legislature, and other policymakers; plan and conduct service activities	No mention

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Iowa	Agency	Specific	STEM	Online application	15 Iowa middle schoolers, high schoolers, and college students	Meet monthly to inform the STEM Council and inspire Iowa youth in STEM	No mention
Kansas	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	Application and agreement form to the Regional Youth Advisory Councils (RYAC) (eight Child Welfare Case Management Provider catchment areas); the youth in each RYAC select one member to represent to the State YAC	Up to 44 youth aged 15 to 20 currently or previously in foster care after their 15th birthday	Serve one year term, must attend regular meetings and be good role models, must have good attendance record for current activities and must have satisfactory school/work performance,	Not specified, but handbook mentions arranging travel needs and accommodations with their advisors
Kentucky	Agency	Specific	Education	Online application	At least two student members from each of the seven Kentucky Board of Education districts, At-large student members, One student from the Kentucky School for the Blind, One student from the Kentucky School for the Deaf, Student members enrolled in a career and technical education pathway	Meet monthly from August to May, a mix of virtual and in person meetings	No mention

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Maryland	Governor's Office	Broad	13 areas of focus: education, safe learning environments, employment opportunities, strategies to increase youth participation in local and state government, health care access and quality of care, substance abuse and underage drinking, emotional and physical well-being, the environment, poverty, homelessness, youth access to state and local services, suicide prevention, and educational accessibility issues for students with disabilities	Online Application; Appointed by Governor, Senate President, Speaker of the House, and the Governor's Office for Children appoints members nominated by Maryland Association of Student Councils, University System of Maryland Student Council, Maryland Higher Education Commission Student Advisory Council, Association of Local Management Boards	24 youth aged 14-22	Serve one two-year term; attend at least four meetings per year and one or two public hearings per year; provide at least annual recommendations to Governor and Legislature; provide at least one legislative proposal each session concerning one of the 13 issue areas; conduct a public awareness campaign about the Council; participate in local youth activities or organizations; advise local officials and community leaders on youth issues; collect information from other youth groups to inform the Council	School credit; no compensation, but entitled to reimbursement for travel expenses

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Massachusetts	Governor's Office	Broad	Including but not limited to 5 topic areas: Civic engagement, education, the environment, housing, and youth violence	Email application	Youth from each county aged 16 to 21	Serve one two-year term or until 21st birthday; meet at least four times per year	No compensation
Minnesota	Agency	Specific	Education	Online application	36 students in grades 8 through 12, four from each Congressional district and four at-large	No mention	No mention
Minnesota	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No mention	No mention	No mention	No mention
Mississippi	Agency	Specific	Education	Mail in application	Students in grades 11 and 12	Serve one two-year term, meet three times per year (one in-person, two virtual)	No mention
Mississippi	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No mention	No mention	No mention	No mention

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Missouri	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	Be nominated, submit application in person and complete interview	Each of the seven administrative areas in the state can have up to four members; youth aged 15 to 21, currently or previously have been in out of home placement	Serve one year term, meet quarterly and attend annual conference, have good attendance record in other activities, be in good standing in school, sign Code of Conduct	\$25 per day for approved event attendance plus mileage reimbursement
Nebraska	Governor's Office, though run by non-profit	Broad		Online application, reviewed by Committee and Governor's Office	25 youth aged 14 to 19	Attend four meetings annually	Costs associated with meeting attendance are paid
Nevada	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No mention	Youth aged 15 to 26 who have experienced foster care	No mention	No mention
Nevada	Agency	Specific	Participatory democracy	No mention	Youth aged 17 to 24	No mention	No mention
New Hampshire	Governor's Office	Specific	Substance misuse prevention	PDF posted, submitted through email	21 High school students (grades 9-12)	Attend monthly council meetings and contribute to yearly recommendations report	No mention
New Jersey	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	Online application	20 youth aged 15-23 with current or former experience with one of the programs in the child welfare system	Attend virtual monthly council meeting, subcommittee meetings may happen weekly or biweekly	Council members are compensated for their time.

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
New Mexico	Agency	Broad	Indigenous youth	No mention	Members of the 23 Nations, Tribes, and Pueblos in the state	No mention	No mention
New York	Governor's Office	Broad	Including but not limited to 5 topic areas: Youth mental health, social media impact, influence of positive role models and mentors, justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion; gender-based violence prevention and response; creating positive interactions between youth and law enforcement	Online form	Youth aged 13-21, 62 members representing all counties	Attend virtual trainings, statewide and monthly regional meetings, attend workgroup meetings (bi-weekly), and adhere to the code of conduct	No mention
North Carolina	Agency	Broad		Appointed by the Governor	20 total members, 10 adults and 10 youth	Meet quarterly, advises local youth council in NC, support state and local government engagement, advise the Secretary of Administration	No mention

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
North Dakota	Agency	Specific	Public health	Online form	Up to 20 youth aged 15 to 21	Serve for two year term, can be extended one year; commit to attending 75% of bimonthly meetings; serve as ambassador for youth; advise NDHHS on initiatives, policies, etc.	No mention; receive written recommendation at end of two years
Oregon	Agency	Specific	Public health	Virtual form (no parental consent required)	Up to 25 youth aged 15-19	Attend 2.5-hour virtual meetings once or twice per month depending on the project, spend about 3-5 additional hours a month on council activities, and attend two virtual full day retreats	\$45/hour for work done on council work through direct deposit or gift cards.
Pennsylvania	Governor's Office	Broad	All agencies compelled by E.O. to work with Commission	Appointed by the Governor	30 Pennsylvanians aged 16-26	No mention of meeting cadence, but requirement to not miss two in a row	Explicitly states no financial compensation but can be reimbursed for reasonable travel expenses.
Rhode Island	Agency	Specific	Youth with special health care needs and diverse learners	Involvement in Dare to Dream initiative	Youth in grades 8 through 12 with special health care needs and diverse learners	Dare to Dream has annual conference; Youth Advisory Council meets from September to June, no cadence mentioned	No mention

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Rhode Island	Agency	Specific	Education	Elected students from each public high school in RI	One elected high school student from each public high school in RI	Serve at least one one-year term, can serve up to three	No compensation, but eligible to receive reimbursement for travel expenses
South Carolina	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	Apply through local office/caseworker	Youth aged 14 to 25 who are currently or previously in foster care	Monthly meetings for workshops, peer networking, and advocacy planning; opportunities for research, problem-solving, and advising the agency; agency organizes panels, focus groups, and listening sessions to further support youth voice	No mention
Tennessee	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No mention	Transition-aged youth in foster care who elect to remain under juvenile court supervision while they complete high school, equivalency, or post-secondary	Must remain under juvenile court supervision, though they are no longer in state custody; report on their experiences and provide policy and programmatic recommendations	Receive a variety of supports and services from child welfare

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Utah	Agency	Broad	Run by Attorney General, programs and policies have a safety nexus	PDF application to submit via email or mail	Utah youth aged 13 to 18	Serve one school year, provide input to AG on events, programs, and policies that affect teens in Utah, attend biweekly meetings, either in person if local or virtually if rural, must attend 60% of meetings	No mention
Utah	Agency	Specific	Historical society	Online application	Utah college students aged 18 to 23	Advise the Historical Society on specific upcoming efforts and investments in Utah to bring youth perspective, dedicate approx. 60-65 hours over 10 months, attend virtual quarterly meetings, serve as social media ambassadors	\$900 stipend
Vermont	Housed in agency for administrative purposes, but advises Governor and General Assembly	Broad	5 subcommittees: climate change, education, equity and anti-racism, youth mental health, and youth voice	Appointed by the Governor	28 Vermont residents aged 11-18, representing each county	Up to 16 meetings per calendar year	\$50.00 per diem and up to \$76.25 for travel expenses per meeting
Virginia	Agency	Specific	Public health	No mention	Youth aged 14 to 21	No mention	No mention

State Name	Governor's Office or Agency	Broad or Specific Charter	Topical Area/Population of Focus	Application Type	Eligibility and composition	Requirements and expectations	Compensation
Washington	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No mention	Youth aged 14 to 24 currently or previously in foster care	No mention	No mention
West Virginia	Agency	Broad	Focused on higher education students	Each student government organization at each institute of higher education selects a representative to the State Council	Elected student representatives from each of WV's institutes of higher education	Serve one year term, meet quarterly	No compensation, but eligible to receive reimbursement for expenses including travel
Wisconsin	Agency	Specific	Foster care and child welfare issues	No mention	No mention	No mention	No mention
Wyoming	Run by an NGO, but supported by the DOH	Broad		No mention	Youth aged 12-24	No mention	No mention