



Podcast Transcript Creating and Sustaining Youth Leadership Councils

Youth Leadership Councils are critical for ensuring that programs and strategies for implementation of teen pregnancy prevention programs are relevant and a good fit for the needs of the community. In this podcast series, project implementers and youth talk about strategies for creating and sustaining Youth Leadership Councils.

Kristine Andrews: Okay, let's go ahead and get started. My name is Kristine Andrews, and I am here today with Dr. Kristen Plastino, Associate Professor at University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and the Director of the UT Teen Health Program.

Thank you for joining us today as we hear, firsthand, how you formalized youth involvement through a youth leadership team. Can you start us off by sharing a brief description of your program?

Kristen Plastino: Yes, hello. The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio UT Teen Health Program promotes adolescent health and wellness by providing medically accurate sexual health information to the community and encourages positive youth development and healthy life choices.

Since 2003, UT Teen Health has offered sex education, enriched with positive youth development, for teens in San Antonio, Texas and surrounding areas. In 2010, UT Teen Health entered into a cooperative agreement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention utilizing a community-wide initiative in

the South San Antonio Community as well as received a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Adolescent Health to rigorously evaluate a high school sex education curriculum model to prevent teen pregnancy.

UT Teen Health is committed to providing medically accurate, age-appropriate and culturally competent information to the community. UT Teen Health has incorporated youth leadership councils in their projects since 2003. Each project had a separate youth leadership council. One named The Youth Leadership Team and the other a Teen Advisory Board.

Both have provided UT Teen Health valuable feedback regarding teen sexual health education, clinical champions, and receptiveness of strategies for reaching teens in school, clinics, and all youth-serving organizations in Bexar County, Texas.

Kristine Andrews: Can you share the steps involved in creating your Youth Leadership Team and describe how your Youth Leadership Team functions?

Kristen Plastino: Sure. Youth leaders are recruited every year from March through July for the upcoming youth leadership team. Recruitment occurs in a variety of ways. At every community mobilization event in which UT Teen Health participates, a sign-up sheet for youth interested in the YLT - or Youth Leadership Team - is provided, and teens are given the YLT application at these events.

These events might be our Youth Leadership Team meetings, high school career and health fairs, school health advisory council meetings, open houses at the schools, parent meetings and even the YLT community outreach events.

Other ways to recruit teens are when the YLT application is also emailed to UT Teen Health implementation partners. These are partners that are implementing the evidence-based program.

This targeted group of implementation partners - including schools, juvenile justice, and foster care programs, and faith-based organizations - hand out the application as well.

The YLT application is also posted on social media sites, such as Facebook. The YLT coordinator is a health educator that has a history of working with youth and has the necessary skills to assess what teens need. Toward the end of June every year, the YLT coordinator calls all the teens who signed up on the YLT interest form and reminds them to apply for the YLT.

The YLT coordinator will then schedule a phone interview with all students who submit an application. Admission to the YLT is determined by both the application as well as the phone interview. Once interviewed, we assess how well the group would work together based on leadership style and schedules. We also strive for a good mix of age groups and genders in the YLT.

Step 2 - after step 1 of recruitment - step 2 is engagement. Every year the newly formed team attends a Leadership Summit. During the YLT Leadership Summit, the youth leaders are placed into three different teams: Blue, Green and Orange.

These teams are strategically assembled to achieve variety in age, grade, gender, leadership experience, and school district. The purpose of these three teams are for the youth leaders to have a support group. The teams compete throughout the year to earn points. The competition helps engage members,

encourages them to participate, and adds an additional incentive for them to hold each other accountable.

These teams earn 15 points for every meeting and community mobilization event they attend and 5 points for every action item submitted. At the end of the year, the community recognition ceremony will recognize the top three teens - along with the top team - with the most points and hours accrued over the year, and they get a prize.

How does the YLT function? Well, they function really as a cohesive group that learns together, plans activities and events, as well, as a team and collaborates with one another to brainstorm ideas regarding teen pregnancy prevention.

Kristine Andrews: Great. When you think about the resources in your community, what did you leverage to help develop your YLT?

Kristen Plastino: Community events were used to recruit youth, core partners to nominate youth, and community resources to hold YLT meetings at their locations throughout the catchment areas.

This included places such as churches, schools, libraries, various community organizations, clinics. We used elected officials' offices and community colleges. Each community resource was given a YLT application package with the recruiting flyer explaining the eligibility for YLT nominations.

Kristine Andrews: And how do you determine council membership?

Kristen Plastino: To be eligible to apply, youth leaders must attend a school and/or be involved in a community or faith-based organization within the catchment area and be 13-to-19 years old.

In addition, we assess in our interviews for the following in our youth leaders: they must be respected by their social network or organization; they need to be a change agent who has the capacity to create positive change in their community; they need to obtain parental permission if they are under 18 years of age; they need to make a commitment of one school year to the Youth Leadership Team - that is August through June; they need to have access to reliable transportation such as a car, bus, or other transportation; and any young person that meets these requirements and eligibility criteria can apply.

Kristine Andrews: And once they achieve membership, how long do they serve?

Kristen Plastino: Members serve for one school year at a time - August to June. Members can reapply each year if they desire. Seniority is not granted for current members. Rather, the group is assessed for a good mix again. We like to keep the group to 12-to-15 members.

Kristine Andrews: When you think about the specific roles and responsibility of the YLT members, can you briefly say some of their responsibilities?

Kristen Plastino: Sure. Youth leaders will participate in educational sessions that are provided by their YLT coordinator and officers or guest speakers in order to become reproductive health peer leaders. They participate in events where peer education is necessary. They give feedback on youth leadership team-related

activities and plan events accordingly, such as the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month that occurs in May and Let's Talk Month in October.

They create educational social media messages that promote teen pregnancy prevention and STD prevention. Every year they design a Youth Leadership Team t-shirt that they wear to all the various events. They help create, design, and promote marketing tools, such as flyers and social media posts, for all YLT events.

They help plan a calendar of activities and logistics for future YLT projects and outreach events, including the Summer Youth Leadership Team Leadership Orientation.

That focuses directly on creating team building skills and cohesion. They also help plan the Annual Leadership Camp that reinforces the sexual health information they learned in their evidence-based program at school or another organization. And also this camp helps prepare them to be informed and effective in the community.

So the YLT officers include the Chair and the Co-chair. Both of them must be very reliable and lead the YLT in the development of a sustainability plan so that the team can continue.

This Chair and Co-chair participate in calls with the YLT coordinator, as needed, to set the agenda. They serve as a link with their team and the YLT coordinator. And they remind their team of upcoming events and meetings.

The Chair specifically facilitates all the YLT meetings with the support of the YLT coordinator. And the Co-chair specifically assists the Chair and helps to facilitate things when the Chair is not available.

Kristine Andrews: Perfect. Thank you. What is the time commitment for Youth Leadership Team members?

Kristen Plastino: The time commitment is about three hours a month. There's one monthly 1½-hour meeting and one monthly 1½-hour call. In addition, the Youth Leaders volunteer at different community mobilization events. We would average about eight community mobilization event opportunities per year.

Kristine Andrews: Does the YLT have an opportunity to interact with other steering committees or advisory boards?

Kristen Plastino: Yes, in fact the UT Teen Health Community Leadership Team was a group comprised of adults, and the YLT would make a video to update that Community Leadership Team every month. That video allowed a connection to occur between the adults and the teens so that each would see what the other was doing to help promote teen pregnancy prevention in the community.

The adults really appreciated hearing the teens' feedback as they made decisions as stakeholders in teen pregnancy prevention. The YLT also met once or twice with two other team leadership groups for a final Leadership Summit.

Kristine Andrews: It must be challenging to keep youth actively engaged in a YLT. What are some of the successful strategies you've used?

Kristen Plastino: Well, in order to keep the youth actively engaged in the YLT, UT Teen Health believes it is important to show a genuine interest in their lives. The YLT coordinator would attend the students' extracurricular events like track meets, football games, drama performances, and high school graduation.

Even if she couldn't attend their event, a simple "Good luck tonight" or a text would make them smile. By attending these events and having a presence in their lives, our coordinator had another avenue to connect with them. And they would, in turn, give- the teens themselves, in turn, would give back to our program and stay actively engaged in the YLT.

Kristine Andrews: And as an organization, what do you do to support the YLT on an ongoing basis?

Kristen Plastino: Well, most importantly, you need to provide a competitive salary to the YLT coordinator, because working with youth is no less valuable than working with adults.

We also recommend sending staff to conferences to build leadership skills and provide peer learning opportunities with other staff who work with youth leaders. We really allowed - or afforded our staff a lot of flexibility and autonomy to be able to do what they thought the teens might need, or the teens would tell them they needed.

And our organization also supports training and skills building in the Youth Leadership Team itself on an ongoing basis.

Trainings were really important and youth leaders received a variety of trainings throughout the year. Course subjects included abstinence, anatomy and puberty, pregnancy, menstruation, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV transmission education, and condom- and contraception-use skills.

Other topics were introduced based on the requests of the Youth Leadership Team. For example, clinical access, reproductive health rights for teens, social media, sexting, bullying, and pregnant and parenting teen information was provided.

There was also a Leadership Summit that was the orientation that took place in August as an eight-hour leadership camp training. Annually, they had their annual training in January - another eight-hour leadership training that was geared toward re-grouping the YLT in reviewing previous information they had learned.

The two trainings built on one another to advance the participants' leadership skills. Continuing education occurred as needed during regular meetings or calls. And most of the schools that the youth leaders attended offered an evidence-based program, and youth leaders were encouraged to participate so that their training could be more complete.

Skill-building was another important part of supporting the Youth Leadership Team. The youth leaders participated in a variety of skill-building exercises throughout their involvement. It was an essential part of training youth leaders to be reproductive health peer leaders in their community.

We helped them with public speaking skills, effective communication skills, decision making, refusal and negotiation, and event-planning skills. All of these skills were utilized to promote the Youth Leadership Team.

Kristine Andrews: Great. If you wanted to give some advice to other Teen Pregnancy Prevention grantees or other program providers, and you were thinking about the benefits and the challenges of having a YLT, what advice would you give? What are some of the benefits and some of the challenges?

Kristen Plastino: Well, having a Youth Leadership Team can really bring energy into your project. Youth are honest, smart; they're always willing to let you know how they feel. And it's really important to embrace them - and their ideas and their energy - and use them to improve your program strategies.

Now, there were definitely some challenges. One of them included competing with other extracurricular activities that the youth leaders were involved in. As a program, it is really important to encourage youth to stay actively involved in their community and school while still remaining active on the Youth Leadership Team.

Some strategies to overcome this challenge is to talk to the youth leaders ahead of time and ask them how they plan to balance the YLT and their other activities. Encourage open communication, attend their events, and always make them feel welcome on the YLT.

Kristine Andrews: Great. So lastly, if our listeners just want to learn more about YLTs, what are some resources that would be helpful to them?

Kristen Plastino: Resources that we utilized were the 40 Developmental Assets Approach, which was a great guide to building strong leaders. In addition, knowing what

SPARK - S-P-A-R-K - or talent each youth brings and encouraging them to use it can be very helpful as well.

We also found Advocates for Youth has a vast variety of resources on their website that you can pick and choose from to use in your Youth Leadership Team activities.

Kristine Andrews: Thank you so very much for your time today and sharing with our audience ways to formalize these engagements through the use of a Youth Leadership Team. Thank you.

Kristen Plastino: Thank you.

END