



Bringing Everyone to the Table: A Crash Course in Advocacy and Systems Change.

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Systems Change brought together advocates from statewide transition-aged youth (TAY) advocacy organizations, local advocacy groups, and the federal government. Gail Goldman, from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, moderated the panel. Ms. Goldman was joined by Heather Dearing, Executive Director of the California Coalition for Youth; Patricia Johnson, from New America Media; Julia Sabory, Director of the San Francisco Youth Commission; Rachel Antrobus, Director of the Transitional Youth Initiative (TAY SF); and Scott Linnenbringer, youth representative and member of Homes Not Jails. Panelists discussed topics ranging from increasing community awareness of TAY issues to involving youth in advocacy and combating community opposition.

Spreading Awareness of TAY Issues

Central to the discussion of youth advocacy was the reality that, as Gail Goldman maintained, traditional homeless policy tends to focus on homeless adults and families and fails to account for the unique needs of transition-aged youth. Most housing and services programs serve clients based on their ages; those over 18 years are considered adults, while those below are considered children. Neither designation accurately encompasses TAY (who, while not children, still require support to successfully transition to adulthood), which the advocates contended means that effectively serving young adults often requires large-scale systems change.

Patricia Johnson of New America Media argued that “widespread change is impossible without heightened awareness about the prevalence of homeless and former foster youth in our communities.” For example, many people are unaware that a high percentage of foster youth age out of the foster care system with no support. Ms. Johnson noted the common misconception that runaway youth have chosen their own fate, and in fact have homes to return to; she countered this assumption, estimating that 88% of runaway youth are actually “throwaway” youth – youth whose families force them to leave their homes.

Identifying the Population:

“There is very little known about TAY; a lot of the time, this population is very difficult to recognize and characterize,” declared Rachel Antrobus, Director of TAY SF. “The first step is to codify the population, to determine their needs and characteristics, before a system can be designed to address their needs,” she argued. Ms. Antrobus acknowledged, however, that this is particularly difficult because many youth will not seek services.

In an effort to bridge the gap between what piecemeal information was available about San Francisco’s youth in 2007 and the information providers and policymakers need to design informed practices, TAY SF created a report outlining the characteristics of the city’s most disconnected youth. The study, titled *Disconnected Youth in San Francisco: A Roadmap to Improving the Life Chances of San Francisco’s Most Vulnerable Young Adults*, focused on youth in or transitioning out of public systems, youth who dropped out of high school, youth who are homeless, youth who have a disability or other special needs, and young unmarried parents. The need for more information about these youth was so dire, Ms. Antrobus said,

that “this report has been called a ‘bible’ by many people; it has been so central and important.” The study’s many revelations include: more than 200 youth in San Francisco alone age out of foster care each year, many of whom have no support system in place; more than five thousand 18 to 24-year-old San Franciscans do not hold a high school diploma; approximately 1,600 youth are homeless in San Francisco at any time; and approximately 500 unmarried women under 21 give birth each year. “Most importantly,” Ms. Antrobus noted, “many of these youth belong to more than one category, which is a barrier to effective service delivery.” As a result of this study, TAY SF estimates that between 5,000 and 8,000 youth between ages 16 and 24 (up to 10% of this age group in San Francisco) are disconnected from education, employment, and social support. Armed with extensive information about San Francisco’s TAY population, and with input from youth about their top concerns and priorities, TAY SF was able to issue a set of policy recommendations that address the specific needs of the city’s youth.

Likewise acknowledging the importance of comprehensive data about the population they serve, the California Coalition for Youth is using an innovative strategy to gather information on a broader scale. The Coalition has operated a 24-hour Youth Crisis Line for more than 20 years; available to youth and their families, “the phone line exists primarily to connect youth in crisis with services in their neighborhoods,” said Heather Dearing, the Coalition’s Executive Director. However, Ms. Dearing indicated that the Coalition also collects generic data about callers from the line, which allows the Coalition to identify population trends and shifting needs. The Coalition uses this data to shape their

policy positions, ensuring that the policies that it promotes are those most likely to assist youth in need.

Personalizing TAY

Ms. Dearing asserted that “social movements and vulnerable populations are much more difficult to ignore when they are given a human face.” To illustrate her argument, Ms. Dearing described a particularly successful effort to personalize youth issues: the Coalition used a number of previously empty walls in the California State Capitol building as a blank canvas, highlighting three homeless youth. The large panels, visible to policymakers and the State Capitol’s many visitors alike, featured photographs, stories, quotes, and statistics about the featured youth and others like them. Since statistics can be very persuasive, and system-wide numbers are hard to come by, Ms. Dearing suggested a more person-centered alternative: using anecdotal statistics from a particular youth’s experience. For example, quoting a young person who says that seven of his ten closest friends slept on the streets last night is an effective way to humanize the homeless youth population while illustrating the scope of the problem.

Involving Youth in Advocacy

“Too often, youth voices are ignored by advocates and policy-makers,” alleged Gail Goldman, “so advocacy organizations have to make youth as visible as possible.” The panelists agreed that the most effective advocacy strategies place youth at the forefront of the movement. Successful advocacy organizations, like those which contributed to this discussion, teach youth to be advocates for themselves and for other youth.

New America Media recommends approaching discussions with youth with an open mind, rather than an agenda. “Open conversations are more likely to glean accurate and useful information from youth advisors,” said Ms. Johnson, acknowledging that even adult allies sometimes discount the validity of the youth perspective. Additionally, Ms. Johnson emphasized the importance of compensating youth for their work whenever possible. Often, youth work is undervalued; Ms. Johnson argued that to create real change, youth work must be valued as much as the work of their adult counterparts.

In the spirit of valuing youth work and experience, the San Francisco Youth Commission, directed by Julia Sabory, brings youth voices straight to San Francisco’s governmental bodies. Since 1996, a group of youth between ages 12 and 23 years have advised the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and the Mayor’s Office on issues important to San Francisco’s young people. With guidance from Ms. Sabory, the Youth Commission considers policy positions on budget priorities, juvenile justice, employment opportunities, and many other issues.

Ms. Antrobus advised keeping youth at the center of advocacy movements by incorporating as much youth participation as possible. “For example,” Ms. Antrobus said, “TAY SF maintains a young adult advisory board, which gathers information, provides trainings, and offers guidance on policy and budgetary recommendations.” TAY SF also encourages local governments to issue an order requiring city and county departments serving TAY to include youth in decision-making.

Honoring Emancipated Youth (HEY) of San Francisco, a youth-driven nonprofit dedicated to the needs of former foster youth and whose members were instrumental in

planning *Bridging the Gaps*, urges local government and nonprofit agencies to transition from being youth-serving to being youth-led. In a youth-led organization, youth act as developers, facilitators, and evaluators of programs and services. Youth are agency representatives, and can speak about the benefits and community impact of the agency's programs. Youth-led organizations also provide education and advocacy training to potential youth advocates, ensuring that youth voices will continue to be heard.

All of the panelists suggested encouraging youth to attend community meetings. A visible youth presence at decision-making forums is an effective way both to keep youth voices and opinions at the center of the process and to personalize TAY issues.

Scott Linnenbringer, youth representative and member of Homes Not Jails, suggests using community events to draw youth in. While events like pizza parties designed to appeal to youth can often seem condescending, Mr. Linnenbringer promotes advocacy-themed events, such as barbeques, that appeal to a wide audience. A recent event sponsored by Homes Not Jails, Mr. Linnenbringer said, "brought in more than 50 people, many of whom were young."

System-Wide Change

"Because social services systems are not set up to serve TAY," Ms. Johnson asserted, "effectively addressing their needs often requires a revamping of the service delivery system." All of the panelists agreed that it is essential to recognize from the outset that large-scale change happens slowly, and advocates must have the commitment to continue working until change is implemented.

Ms. Antrobus proposed that creating an interagency council on transition-aged youth, including the mayor's office, local school district superintendants, city college chancellors, and other local government officials is an effective way to lay the groundwork for a local infrastructure to serve youth. An interagency council connecting otherwise isolated members of the service-delivery system creates relationships and increases communication, thereby enhancing coordination and limiting duplication of services to youth who face multiple barriers.

Combating Community Opposition (NIMBY)

The panelists acknowledged that community members are frequently opposed to locating new low-income and homeless housing and services in their neighborhoods. Because community approval is essential to the success of housing and services programs, overcoming opposition is a key aspect of TAY advocacy.

Ms. Antrobus advised building coalitions with sometimes unlikely partners. "In particular," said Ms. Antrobus, "the support of housing developers has been crucial to TAY SF's success," allowing them to create approximately 450 new youth beds since its inception in 2006.

Listening to the concerns of community members is vital to understanding and overcoming doubt and opposition. Advocates should talk to people individually when possible, said Ms. Goldman, since it is easier to understand (and by extension relieve) fears and concerns on an individual level than on a group level.

Panelists agreed that initially acquiescing to some possibly unreasonable demands can also be an effective way to overcome opposition. When its demands are consented to,

the community feels as though its concerns have been addressed and is more likely to welcome the housing or services; sometimes, once the program is established, the community will begin to understand that their fears were unfounded and rescind the demand.

The panelists also proposed entering into community benefit agreements, in which TAY providers agree to perform an activity that will benefit the community as a whole in exchange for the community permitting the TAY housing or services. Community benefits agreements can be an effective way to balance community concerns with a proposal that will benefit the community as a whole. For example, a community might agree to allow a low-income housing development in exchange for an agreement to clean up a dilapidated motel in the area.

Finally, panelists agreed that it is useful to begin advocacy with youth in the community. Youth are often more likely to engage with social justice movements, particularly those centered around their peers. Persuading youth to favor TAY programs can be an effective strategy for also reaching their parents.

Demonstrating Your Successes

Legislators, local government officials, and communities are reluctant to invest in programs which are not demonstrably successful. Ms. Dearing suggested that advocates provide an analysis of costs savings whenever possible. Communities value social programs that save money; when advocates can show that effectively serving underprivileged populations actually has the potential to save a community money in the long run, communities are more to allocate funds to those programs.