



Community Catalyst Youth Advocacy Board and Youth Policy Consultants

Building power of youth for equitable access to mental health and substance use disorder services.

Youth substance misuse and mental illness are on the rise. But these issues are not always treated like the health issues they are. Unfortunately, only a fraction of affected youth receives the treatment and support services they need to live healthier lives. As a result of racism, stigma, and other forms of discrimination, this is especially true for BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other systemically and systematically-excluded communities.

Community Catalyst's Substance Use Disorder team launched the Youth Advisory Board and Youth Policy Consultants (YAB/YPC) to ensure that young people had a voice in shaping the policy changes we fight for and the advocacy strategies that we use to get there. The mission of the YAB/YPC is to broaden, strengthen and showcase the role of young people in Community Catalyst's work. Community Catalyst actively focuses on building their power to shape and drive forward key racial equity and health justice policy and advocacy priorities across the organization's mission for health justice. The YAB/YPC work to build the power of youth within state- and locally based organizations to foster the implementation of these policies in ways that prioritize the needs of BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and systemically excluded youth who have been most harmed or overlooked by the health system.

Importance of Lived Experience

We believe that young people with lived experiences of mental health and substance use challenges, including addiction, should be shaping the future of these services. Through their lived experiences, these young people understand what's not working in the current system and what needs to change. In addition to those with personal experiences struggling with mental health and/or substance use, those who support family members and friends also see how the current system needs to be improved to better meet the needs of the people they love. Everyone joining this board brings with them at least one of these two experiences.

Youth Advisory Board

The Youth Advisory Board consists of Youth between the ages of 16 and 23. They complete paid work with Community Catalyst and independently to highlight youth-related policy and service needs. They take on initiatives such as:

- Participate in monthly virtual meetings
- Provide input on advocacy strategies, policy priorities, toolkits and talking points
- Offer advice to Community Catalyst in its advocacy for youth mental health and substance use disorder prevention
- Develop videos and communications strategies to reduce the stigma and promote prevention services

Youth Policy Consultants

The Youth Policy Consultants group was convened as a paid outlet for further advocacy for YAB alumni who have moved beyond the age range of the original group. The YPC have developed more advanced advocacy skills and use them in the above activities, plus:

- Engage with local/state/federal organizations advocating for youth mental health and substance use disorder services and policies
- Speak at Community Catalyst workshops and events, including the organizational convenings and panels
- Participate in discussion panels informing federal policy makers regarding mental health and substance use disorder policy, services and supports.

Recent Initiatives

- Develop materials to be used to train and educate partners on how to engage and work with youth to further policy advocacy goals
- Briefed the Senate H.E.L.P. Committee and the Biden Administration on lived experience to advocate for restorative justice and the implementation trauma-informed care practices

- Create a toolkit full of resources for youth and practitioners wanting to engage youth in the health justice space
- Author policy brief focusing on practices that best address the youth mental health and substance use crises within schools
- Plan and deliver most attended and highly-rated break-out session of 2023 Community Catalyst convening