



Engaging Rural Youth

The health and well-being of Native youth represent the future health of their communities. The Native Connections grant program helps American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities identify and address the behavioral health needs of Native youth. The program supports grantees in reducing suicidal behavior and substance use among Native youth up to age 24, and supporting youth as they transition into adulthood.

Lack of parental supervision, academic problems, drug availability, poverty, and peer rejection are all risk factors associated with an increased likelihood of substance use and suicide by youth.ⁱ Protective factors associated with positive outcomes for AI/AN youth include categories such as: cultural connectedness, positive social norms, familial and non-familial connectedness, and positive self-image.ⁱⁱ

Some challenges to engaging rural youth and maintaining their involvement include scheduling conflicts, experience barriers, transportation, young people having a limited voice, events or meetings not being appealing to young people, and lack of understanding of how young people can contribute.

Youth groups (which could be a youth council, youth advisory board, or other type of committee or association) are comprised of a collection of young people who come together to offer input and provide insight on the needs of the youth in the community. Youth involvement and inclusion in decision-making helps to keep them engaged in their community, and keeping them engaged in positive activities gives youth a safe outlet and a way to connect with peers and other positive role models in their community.

The ideas provided in this document can be put forward in a youth group setting or converted into a program based on the needs of the community. While these ideas are geared towards a rural community, they can be used in any setting.



Youth Groups, Advisory Boards, and Councils

What is a youth group?

A youth group (youth advisory board, youth council, etc.) provides a way to enable youth to have a role in helping to solve problems in their community. Each youth



group has its own identity based around the community that it serves, while providing youth an opportunity to learn responsibility and leadership, as well as to contribute to their community. These groups can be temporary or permanent based on the needs of the community. Youth group members typically include middle or high school-aged youth and extend to the young adult years (ages 18 to 24).

What does a youth group do?

Youth groups determine activities based on the needs of their community. Once community needs are determined, a strategy can be made to plan activities that will meet those needs. Examples include:

- Volunteer to help elders
- Volunteer at a local animal shelter, food bank, etc.
- Food or clothing drives
- Raise money for a community member in need
- Sponsor alcohol or drug free events

Youth can also plan and implement service-learning projects or team-building activities, such as outdoor experiential learning activities (e.g., hikes, bike rides, canoeing, harvesting salmon, snowshoe workshop, gardening, etc.).

Why create a youth group?

A youth group can provide young people with a way to harness their combined talents and energy as well as a way to become involved in decision-making that affects the lives of those in their community as well as themselves. Involvement in a youth group



can build skills and increase values such as: **cultural awareness, respect, responsibility, teamwork, conflict resolution, time management, and communication.**

Other benefits include:

- Strengthen communities
- Increase engagement in community wellness activities
- Recognize and develop talent
- Build leadership skills
- Increase decision-making and problem-solving skills
- Grow positive self-identity and confidence
- Promote involvement in decision-making (tribal or local government)
- Support positive peer relationships

"When youth get involved in prevention, they feel good about helping their communities and youth make the biggest difference for change."

Stevi Johnson, age 13, Absentee Shawnee Tribe and Sac and Fox 2017–2018 Jr. Miss Sac and Fox Nation Princess of Oklahoma and member of Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America

Steps for creating a formal youth group

1. Youth decide to organize.
2. A committee is formed. Members include youth and adults.
3. A youth coordinator or advisor is designated. This may be a paid or volunteer position and could be a tribal employee, teacher, parent, or community member.
4. The committee develops by-laws for the youth group. Keep in mind that the group is tailored to meet the needs of the youth and the values and traditions of the respective tribe or supporting organization.



5. A resolution is drafted and presented with the by-laws to the tribal government or supporting organization for consideration. The resolution is designed to ensure that the youth group is part of the supporting organization's permanent structure.ⁱⁱⁱ
6. Elections are conducted for youth officers.
7. Youth conduct meetings and develop their course of direction.



Youth group member roles and responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of a youth group is decided by the committee upon its creation. Some roles might include:

- Attend regular meetings
- Help organize and participate in a minimum number of events per year
- Engage other youth to participate in positive activities
- Model healthy habits and serve as a role model to other youth (i.e., be on time for meetings, show respect toward others and their ideas)
- Maintain good grades and positive attitude

Programming

Organized activities for youth provide a way to bring young people together and offer a safe outlet in a controlled environment. Those in rural communities may have difficulty getting youth interested and providing activities while keeping financial limits in mind. Youth activities do not have to cost money, and those involved can volunteer their time. Some ideas for free or low-cost activities that will work for all youth are:

- Movie nights
- Game nights
- Medicine identification and harvesting
- Drum social with potluck
- Planned sports (open gym, 3-on-3 basketball tournament, annual color run, etc.)
- Storytelling
- Lock-ins
- Nature walks
- Digital storytelling
- Book club (with donated books or books checked out from a local library)
- Volunteering (planting flowers, cleaning up a local park, assisting elders, etc.)

Strategies for keeping youth engaged

A strong core group is important for regular interaction and to encourage participation. As youth in that core group age out and new youth cycle in, it can be difficult to ensure groups remains strong. Encouraging and keeping youth involvement increases the likelihood of young people remaining in the area after graduation, which can benefit rural communities.^{iv}



Encourage youth to develop a strong bond by:

- Arranging activity schedules around youth involved
- Providing consistency (regularly scheduled activities)
- Providing snacks or meals when possible during activities
- Hosting events and activities to encourage youth involvement (see examples above)
- Utilizing social media for scheduling and updates
- Creating public service announcements

“We try to always offer a meal, which can be difficult depending on the funding source. Some of our other programs have been able to help cover the cost of these. Because all of our communities struggle with food insecurity, it’s important for us to offer food.”

Wabaaki Health & Wellness/ Wabanaki Public Health

Conclusion

When thinking about youth programming, grantees should look at existing programming in their communities and consider integrating mental health promotion, suicide prevention, and substance use prevention activities into those programs. Grantees must involve AI/AN community members—including, but not limited to, young people up to and including age 24—in all grant activities, including planning and carrying out the plan.

Youth engagement recognizes that young people are already leaders in many ways, and acknowledges their right to participate in decisions that impact them. Valuing the skills and strengths youth bring to the table helps to keep them engaged and strengthens protective factors for AI/AN young people.



Resources

Center for Native American Youth
<http://www.cnay.org/>

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America
<https://www.cadca.org/>

Healthy Native Youth
<https://www.healthynativeyouth.org/>

National Congress of American Indians
<http://www.ncai.org/>

National Indian health board
<https://www.nihb.org/>

Native Connections Webinars
<https://www.samhsa.gov/native-connections/webinars>

Native Wellness Institute
<https://www.nativewellness.com/>

Project Venture
<https://projectventure.org/>

United National Indian Tribal Youth
<https://unityinc.org/>

WeRNative
<https://www.wernative.org/>

ⁱ <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/substance-abuse/risk-and-protective-factors-substance-use-abuse-and-dependence>

ⁱⁱ Journal of Primary Prevention. 2017 Apr;38(1-2):5-26. doi: 10.1007/s10935-016-0455-2. Identifying Protective Factors to Promote Health in American Indian and Alaska Native Adolescents: A Literature Review, Henson M1, Sabo S2, Trujillo A3, Teufel Shone N4.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27826690>

ⁱⁱⁱ A sample Constitution, Bylaws, and Resolution can be found at <https://unityinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/UNITY-YC-Handbook.pdf>

^{iv} <https://publicpolicy.wharton.upenn.edu/live/news/2393-rural-america-is-losing-young-people->

Note: Inclusion of a resource in this publication does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.