

# **Youth in Governance: Supports and Resources Are Critical Components for Youth Success**

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### **Abstract**

*Involving youth in governance can be an important way to ensure that their needs are being met by the community and also an opportunity for positive development for the youth involved. However, if young people are thrust into adult institutions without appropriate supports and resources, they may not be fully engaged, and can end up feeling isolated or bored. Youth who are participating fully in adult governance organizations require active mentorship and support by adults, and access to resources for them to experience success in their roles. They must feel that their input is valued, and must have meaningful opportunities for engagement. This article describes how the Youth Development Initiative of San Mateo County, California, is addressing these needs as part of its Youth Commission project in a way that has already had a dramatic impact on how the county provides mental health services for youth.*

**Keywords:** [youth development](#), [community outreach](#), [governance](#)

## Introduction

The Youth Development Initiative (YDI) in San Mateo County, California, began in 1993 with the creation of the San Mateo County Youth Commission. YDI has since expanded to include four different projects: a community outreach and awareness campaign, peer mentorship and a youth advisory board at a local high school, a student governance and youth-led after school project at a local middle school, and the Youth Commission, which places youth on county commissions and non-profit boards of directors. When it was created, the staff of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors coordinated the Youth Commission. YDI is now housed in a community-based nonprofit.<sup>1</sup> Funding for the projects comes from a variety of sources including private foundations, community collaborations, and the county. In particular the San Mateo County Public Health Department provides funding for the Youth Commission. This is based on the idea that the Youth Commission not only positively impacts the individuals who serve as Youth Commissioners, but ultimately strengthens the policies and programs developed for youth and, therefore, can benefit the overall health and wellbeing of youth throughout the county. This report focuses on the Youth Commission and one project through which Youth Commissioners were able to influence county systems to ensure the needs of youth were understood and met.

## The San Mateo County Youth Commission

The Youth Commission was the first project of the San Mateo County Youth Development Initiative. Created in 1993 by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, it was envisioned as a way for youth to give input into the decision-making processes of San Mateo County. This initiative, led by long-time youth advocate Supervisor Rich Gordon, was based on the premise that youth are the experts of their own experience and, therefore, valuable resources for the development and implementation of programs and policies impacting them. The Board of Supervisors agreed that tapping into youth as resources could mean more effective and sustainable youth programming and policies for San Mateo County.

When it was created, the Youth Commission consisted of a body of approximately ten youth with whom existing county boards and commissions were to consult on issues or policies affecting youth. In reality, however, this was not how it functioned. Few, if any, boards or commissions took advantage of the opportunity to consult with the Youth Commission. Its function was not integrated into the work of the county systems. After a couple of years, Supervisor Gordon proposed that the Youth Commission be restructured and that Youth Commissioners be integrated into the existing boards and commissions addressing policy or programming pertaining to youth. Two seats were opened up to Youth Commissioners on 11 different boards and commissions, such as the Juvenile Justice Commission, the Drug and Alcohol Advisory Board, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Mental Health Advisory Board, and the AIDS Advisory Board. In this past year, the Youth Commission has also expanded to include seats for youth on five nonprofit boards of directors. The Youth Commission is coordinated by a full-time staff member who is employed by a local nonprofit agency which serves as the fiscal agent for the entire Youth Development Initiative.

**San Mateo County**

San Mateo County covers almost 450 square miles. It borders San Francisco County in the North and Santa Clara County in the South. The Pacific Ocean defines its westernmost boundary and the San Francisco Bay its easternmost boundary. With a population of 723,453, it is the most populous county in California. While San Mateo County has a median family income of \$84,171—the highest in California—its residents face many challenges, particularly the high cost of living and lack of affordable housing. The primary industries in San Mateo are agriculture and biotechnologies, which speaks to the variety of environments in the county from the rural coast to the more industrial mid-peninsula. San Mateo County is also culturally diverse. Thirty-two percent of residents are born outside of the United States and 41 percent of households speak a language other than English. The vast geography and great diversity of the county is both an asset and a challenge to effective community development. The San Mateo County Youth Commission is able to build on the assets by bringing together youth from all regions of the county and from a variety of family backgrounds. With this they are able to articulate different perspectives and enrich the work of the Youth Commission and each board or commission that they serve.

**Recruiting Youth**

Youth Commissioners are recruited through high schools, community colleges, and after-school programs. Referrals also come from community-based organizations or adults who sit on the County boards and commissions. Recruiting efforts are broad so that the Youth Commission can reflect the diversity of San Mateo County. All efforts under the Youth Development Initiative, not only the Youth Commission, aim to recruit traditional as well as non-traditional leaders. Based on the premise that youth are experts of their own experience, efforts are made to recruit youth who have experienced “the system” or been through the programs that the County delivers. Youth are also recruited for their desire to use their perspective and experience to contribute to strengthening the community. Youth who are referred to be Youth Commissioners must fill out an application, be interviewed by the Youth Commission Coordinator, and be approved by the board or commission on which they will serve. Once approved, Youth Commissioners attend the monthly meetings of the board or commission on which they serve, as well as a monthly Youth Commission meeting. This structure gives the Youth Commissioners a voice on boards and commissions and also an opportunity to operate as a body of youth leaders which takes initiative on issues it identifies as salient for youth in the county. Youth Commissioners are assigned an adult mentor from the board or commission on which they serve, and work closely with the adult Youth Commission Coordinator who serves as their advocate and liaison to the board or commission.

Several years after implementation, an evaluation of the Youth Commission project showed that while the Youth Commissioners were learning about governance by being present at meetings, they were not participating in a meaningful way. Youth often did not speak up during meetings or participate in the activities of the board. Youth would report that they did not understand much of the content of the meetings and adults were concerned that they were unable to cast informed votes on issues addressed by the board. These factors undermined the primary goals of

the Youth Development Initiative, which are to legitimize youth's voices and to facilitate a process whereby youth can impact their community in positive ways.

In order to ensure that the goals of YDI were met, YDI put several new program components in place to address these issues in the Youth Commission project.

- **Engagement:** As a way for Youth Commissioners to be more fully engaged, they are now required to work on a project for their board or commission, as well as a group project with other Youth Commissioners. The projects provide a structure within which youth have an opportunity to actively engage in a subject matter that is germane to the work of the board. Youth become familiar with the issues relevant to their board and in return offer the board a youth perspective on those issues.
- **Adult Training:** The Youth Commission Coordinator meets with mentors to discuss best practices in mentorship. Mentors are trained in ways to partner with youth, provide the supports Youth Commissioners need to be effective in their role and overcome *adultism*, which happens when adults negate the value of youth input or ideas simply because of their age. More specifically, mentors are trained to encourage youth participation during their board meetings. They help Youth Commissioners understand the content of the materials and clarify references youth might not understand, such as laws, policies, or even acronyms they may not be familiar with. Mentors are encouraged to specifically ask a Youth Commissioner what they think about an issue if they have not spoken up during board discussions. Mentors also receive training about ways they can support youth in identifying and carrying out a project for their board. They help to connect the work of the board to the interests of the Youth Commissioner, set up goals and a timeline for the project, and identify necessary resources for carrying it out.
- **Community Resources:** Participating boards and commissions are encouraged to help youth access community resources such as funding for individual projects, links to community agencies, or access to individuals who can help their projects come to fruition. Because the Youth Commission was started by the Board of Supervisors and is funded by the County Department of Public Health, youth potentially have access to extensive resources within the county system. These resources may be professionals who can support a particular component of a Youth Commissioner's project or a program that may have materials that could be useful for the project. However, without assistance, youth may not know that these resources exist or may not know how to access them.

### **Youth Mental Health Survey Project**

This year, the Youth Commissioners on the Mental Health Advisory Board had an excellent opportunity to leverage their project in a way that will influence mental health programming and policy in San Mateo County for years to come. Their project provides examples of how YDI's program components work in practice and how they ultimately led to an extremely successful project.

In Fall 2004, voters in California passed Proposition 63, or the "Mental Health Services Act." The proposition placed a 1 percent tax on incomes over \$1 million for California residents, and funds gathered from this tax are earmarked for the improvement of mental health services in each county of California. Each county has been faced with the arduous task of reporting to the state on how the funds will be distributed. The planning process has been in progress for the last six months, and has been intricate and involved.

The Youth Commissioners serving on the Mental Health Advisory Board saw an opportunity to play a significant role in this planning process. Last winter, they drafted a **needs assessment survey** to assess youth perceptions, knowledge, and access to mental health services, and whether or not mental health services for youth need to be improved. Youth Commissioners met with the County's Research and Evaluation Department, the Children's Committee and the Mental Health Advisory Board to obtain their feedback on the efficacy and reliability of the survey, and the Mental Health Advisory Board approved their final draft.

The survey was informally reviewed by the County Office of Education, which granted permission for distribution to the schools. The Youth Commission Coordinator contacted school principals and seven schools agreed to participate in the needs assessment. Participating schools varied in geography and demographics, and consisted of public and private schools, as well as comprehensive and continuation schools. Students of various age groups completed the questionnaire, administered by teachers in a variety of classroom settings. Over 1000 questionnaires were collected, and the final analysis was calculated with a sample size of 980.

Once the questionnaires were collected, County Mental Health offered support in the data entry and analysis process. An intern from the County Office of Quality Improvement in Mental Health Services agreed to take on the responsibility of working with the Youth Commissioners on the data entry and analysis portion of their project. Because this aspect was outside the scope of knowledge for the Youth Commissioners, the Youth Commission Coordinator, and their mentors, the role of the intern was significant. Youth Commissioners, along with a team of three other adults and one youth from the Youth Development Initiative, were trained in and completed the data entry. The intern worked closely with the Youth Commissioners to insure that they were involved as much as possible in data analysis and the writing of the final report. Further, the Youth Commissioners consulted with the intern to clarify that the target audience for the final report should be County Mental Health and other mental health service providers.

The final report provided youth input into the County's planning process for distribution of funds from the Mental Health Services Act. The Youth Commissioners intended that the information would impact the planning process for services to transition-age youth (ages 16-24) and prevention services for youth. Additionally, the report was designed to inform mental health service providers in the private sector about ways to more effectively reach youth. Specifically, the

report provided information to decision-makers and service providers about youth perceptions and knowledge of mental health issues and youth needs for mental health services.

The Deputy Director of Mental Health Services included information from the report in her report at the final planning prioritization meeting for the Mental Health Services Act work group. The results from the Youth Commissioner survey informed the prioritization process and influenced the recommendations for the distribution of funds within the county. Information from the report will also be used to determine distribution of prevention funds under the Act. Additionally, the report was included in the California Adolescent Health Collaborative newsletter which is distributed throughout California. As a result, several requests for both the instrument and the final report have been received from other counties throughout California to aid in their MHSA planning process. Further, several community-based organizations have asked for the final report and instrument in order to improve their delivery of mental health services to youth.

### **Lessons Learned**

Some of the challenges in the mental health survey process could have been avoided with more advanced planning. For example, some of the wording of the instrument was not congruent with the questions being asked in the analysis. The wording of the survey instrument was not problematic in itself. Because it was written by and for youth, it was effective in generating honest responses from youth who completed it. The problem was in the lack of a cohesive process from start to finish. In the future, the individual running the data analysis (in this case the intern) will be involved in reviewing the survey before it is implemented so that the goals for the data gathering are clear from the beginning and more fully integrated into the data analysis. Additionally, the data from the survey were entered by several different individuals, so the entry format was not always consistent. This delayed the analysis, as the intern had to correct these inconsistencies in order to produce reliable results. In the future, data entry will be done by fewer participants or contracted out to professionals.

When the project was originally conceived by the Youth Commissioners, they did not anticipate that the county would be as receptive as it was to the information they were gathering. They did not imagine the large scope or impact it would have on the county's planning process. Therefore, appropriate and sufficient resources were not identified ahead of time in order to create a seamless process. Rather, resources were identified as needs arose in each step. More forward-thinking planning will ensure a more consistent and efficient process in the future.

Youth are capable of legitimate participation in large community efforts. It is important to identify both their strengths and limitations in early stages of their participation. The Youth Commissioners on the Mental Health Advisory Board and the adults who supported them were able to work together effectively in this project to bring reliable and valuable youth perspectives to a process that will impact youth throughout the county.

Several components made the project of the Mental Health Advisory Board Youth Commissioners successful:

1. **Program Structure:** The support of the youth mentors and the Youth Commission Coordinator ensured that deadlines were met, that youth had the advocacy they needed to access resources, and that all individuals offering their support for the project were on the same page. This helped the Youth Commissioners to navigate a rather involved process and fulfill their responsibilities. Often, adults say they want youth input and support youth ideas, yet they fail to provide the supports necessary for youth to achieve success in their endeavors. The adults in this process were able to work in *partnership* with youth. They followed the lead of the youth and plugged in the support, resources, and guidance the youth needed in order for their project to not only come to fruition, but to have a large-scale impact.
2. **Youth Commitment:** The Youth Commissioners who serve on the Mental Health Advisory Board were fully committed to designing a strategy for achieving meaningful engagement. They received positive feedback from their adult partners and were offered opportunities to be engaged. They saw that their ideas were valuable and could have a significant, positive impact on their community. This motivated them to work hard to develop the survey and carry out their project. They were confident in their ability to articulate their goals and bring legitimate youth perspectives to the planning process. They were able to work closely with adults to ensure that their project was viewed as relevant to the work of the board. They took the steps necessary to create a valid instrument, collected data from a large sample, and participated in the data analysis so that the final report reflected authentic youth voices and was useful to the planning process. Their thoughtfulness, energy and commitment has already had a major impact on how County Mental Health plans to improve services to youth.
3. **Adult Commitment:** The adult partners in this project recognized the value of the perspective and energy that the Youth Commissioners could bring to this planning process. Willingness of the adults in the system to listen, ask questions, provide resources, and respect youth input as valid and necessary was essential. They did not tokenize the work of the Youth Commissioners or patronize their input or ideas. They were able to strike a balance between allowing youth to take a significant lead in the project and offering the resources and supports they needed to succeed. The adults worked hard to ensure that the process was thorough and met county standards. They trusted the youth to follow through on their ideas and maintained high expectations for the potential impact of the Youth Commissioners' work.
4. **Community Resources:** The project was propelled by the direct and generous support of the Director of Children's Services, the support and approval of the Mental Health Advisory Board, the availability of the county's Research and Evaluation teams, and the Office of Quality Improvement. Each of these entities, when called upon, offered professional support and guidance to the

Youth Commissioners. They did not hesitate to provide the time and resources necessary to meet the project goals. The Youth Commission Coordinator played an important role as a liaison between the Youth Commissioners, the school principals and County Office of Education, ensuring the legitimacy of the project and communicating the larger context for the distribution of the needs assessment. While it is uncertain how the schools may have reacted if the Youth Commissioners had been their only contact, it is likely that the schools would have been more skeptical and not as receptive to the project.

### **Opportunities and Supports**

Effective youth development strategies must not only provide opportunities for youth influence, but must also offer supports to help youth make the most of these opportunities. Youth need access to resources such as information, funding, and professionals in the areas of interest they are exploring. They need guidance with project planning, time management, and follow-through on action steps. They need adults to set high expectations, while maintaining a realistic concept of what is achievable with the given resources and time. Youth can bring valuable and valid information, but they often lack the experience or access to have impact in higher levels of governance. In the Youth Development Initiative, and specifically through the Youth Commission, youth have a meaningful role in the development of programs and policy; at the same time, we must provide them with the resources and mentoring they need to succeed.

### **Endnote**

1. The Youth Development Initiative is a project of Youth and Family Enrichment Services (YFES), a private non-profit agency in San Mateo County that provides a wide array of free and low-cost services to help children, teens and adults who are dealing with substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health, relationship and communication issues. YFES was created in July 2003 by the merger of Youth and Family Assistance (YFA) and Family and Community Enrichment Services (FACES), two of San Mateo County's most reputable non-profit agencies. For more information about YFES and its programs, visit their web site at [www.yfes.org](http://www.yfes.org).

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**Christine Poremski** joined Youth and Family Enrichment Services with over ten years of for-profit business and marketing experience combined with an abiding interest in social justice. A graduate of The Pennsylvania State University, Christine also earned an MBA from the Anderson School of Business at UCLA. Her career has ranged from serving as Account Executive at Saatchi and Saatchi Advertising to Director of Marketing at software startup eSubscriber, Inc. She has also worked with the non-profit organizations Food First and CorpWatch. She joined YFES most recently from the Russian River Valley, where she was Marketing Manager for the Davis Bynum Winery. In her spare time, Christine backpacks around the globe and publishes an underground newsletter.