



**QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER**  
ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN  
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# FACILITATING A CO-DESIGN PROCESS FOR YOUTH ADVISORY BOARDS (YABS)

A practical approach to facilitating a co-design process for  
developing or strengthening a Youth Advisory Board

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# Introduction

This guide provides a practical approach to facilitating a co-design process for developing or strengthening a Youth Advisory Board (YAB). While there is no single model for a YAB, there are common design components that must be considered. These components are described in the document titled: Design Considerations for Development of a Youth Advisory Board. This document can be found at <https://www.qic-ey.org>, along with other products that support youth engagement.

This facilitation guide offers a structured way to engage people with lived experience and system partners in shared decision-making around common YAB design components. Working through decisions collaboratively can help to ensure that the resulting YAB reflects the priorities, context, and strengths of the people with lived experience and system partners who will shape and sustain it. This guide is intended to be used alongside broader guidance on YAB design that is provided in the companion guide noted above.

The process described here is designed to:

- » Center the perspectives and voices of people with lived experience
- » Support meaningful partnership between people with lived experience and agency leadership
- » Generate practical, actionable design recommendations
- » Lay the foundation for implementation



# What is Co-Design in the Context of YAB Development?

Co-design is a structured process in which people with lived experience and agency leadership work together to shape decisions that affect them. In the context of YAB development, co-design moves beyond seeking input and instead creates shared ownership of key decisions.

This approach recognizes that:

- » People with lived experience bring perspectives that are essential to system improvement
- » Agency leaders bring knowledge of systems, policy, and implementation constraints
- » Strong YABs are built through partnership—not consultation alone

The co-design process described in this guide ensures that participants generate input across several YAB design components, including:

- » Purpose, Activities, and Youth Engagement
- » Structure of Youth Advisory Boards
- » Leadership and Governance
- » Eligibility Criteria and Member Engagement
- » Recruitment and Application Processes
- » Communication Strategies
- » Member Compensation
- » Transportation and Travel Support
- » Management and Staffing
- » Meeting Cadence and Logistics
- » Meeting Agendas and Facilitation

Co-design ensures that decisions about structure, purpose, and operations are informed by both lived experience and system realities.

# Preparing for the Co-Design Process

Effective co-design begins well before the session itself. Preparation is critical to ensuring meaningful participation and productive outcomes.

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## CLARIFY PURPOSE AND SCOPE

Clearly define what the group is being asked to design. For example:

- » Are participants designing a new YAB or strengthening an existing one?
- » What decisions must be made during the session?
- » How will the results be used (e.g., informing a contract, policy, or program design)?

Be transparent about what decisions are open to input as well as those that are constrained by policy, funding, or timelines.

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## IDENTIFY PARTICIPANTS

A strong co-design group includes:

- » People with lived experience (current and/or alumni)
- » Agency leadership and staff
- » Community partners or contracted providers (if applicable)

Intentional representation matters. Consider geographic diversity, inclusion of a range of lived experiences, and ensuring a good balance between people with lived experience and agency leadership and staff participants.

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## PREPARE PARTICIPANTS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Participants benefit from advance preparation to ensure they can engage fully.

Recommended preparation includes:

- » A clear overview of the session purpose and outcomes
  - » Expectations for participation
  - » Opportunities to review key concepts in advance
  - » Pre-session activities to gather input (e.g., surveys)
-

Agency leadership, staff, and system partner participants should be encouraged to approach the work by listening without defensiveness, even when feedback challenges existing systems or practices. They contribute by sharing their system knowledge transparently, helping to ground the group in what is possible and what considerations may need to be taken into account. This includes being clear about which decisions are open to input and which may be constrained by policy, funding requirements, or timelines that are inflexible.

It is equally important to prepare people with lived experience so that expectations are realistic and the co-design process remains productive. Participants should understand that while their input is essential and highly valued, some ideas generated during the session will require consideration beyond the session to determine viability, such as buy-in from agency leadership, alignment with broader system priorities, or balance with competing demands and resource limitations. They should also be supported in focusing their contributions on recommendations for system improvement—using their experiences to inform ideas and solutions—rather than becoming solely focused on individual situations or personal advocacy.

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## PLAN FOR MEANINGFUL LIVED EXPERIENCE PARTICIPATION

To support authentic engagement:

- » Compensate people with lived experience for their time and expertise
- » Address transportation and access needs
- » Use multiple contribution formats (verbal, written, small group)
- » Create a structure that reduces power imbalances

People with lived experience should not be expected to “fit into” traditional meeting structures. The process should be designed to include them.

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## PREPARE FACILITATORS

Facilitators play a critical role in creating structure during the co-design process while still protecting and elevating participant voice. They are responsible for guiding the session, managing time, and keeping discussions focused, but without narrowing the space in ways that limit ideas or participation. Effective facilitators also make intentional efforts to ensure that all participants can contribute, balancing the need to move through the agenda with the need to allow for meaningful discussion and reflection. A facilitator who can maintain neutrality should be considered whenever possible.

### **Facilitators should:**

- » Understand YAB design components
- » Be prepared to guide discussion without controlling it
- » Create space for lived experience leadership
- » Manage time while honoring participant contributions

Effective co-design requires intentional strategies to ensure that all participants can meaningfully contribute in ways that work for them. Facilitators should use multiple methods to support participation, including verbal discussion, written responses, and small group work, so that individuals with different communication styles and comfort levels have opportunities to engage. It is also important to actively balance “airtime” between people with lived experience and agency leadership, creating space for lived experience voices to be centered, while still drawing on the knowledge and experience of agency leadership.

Throughout the process, facilitators should normalize the understanding that not all decisions will be finalized during the session. Co-design is an iterative process, and the goal is to generate, explore, and refine ideas over time rather than reach immediate conclusions. To support transparency and shared ownership, input should be captured visibly during the session, such as through flip charts or shared notes, so participants can see their contributions reflected in the group’s work. After the session, facilitators and co-designers should revisit and synthesize the ideas that were generated, ensuring that participant input is thoughtfully organized and carried forward into next steps.



# Common Challenges and Considerations

Jurisdictions may encounter a range of common challenges when developing and implementing a Youth Advisory Board. One of the most frequent is balancing structure with flexibility—ensuring there is enough structure to provide clarity, consistency, and purpose, while still allowing the flexibility needed for people with lived experience to meaningfully shape the process and for the work to evolve over time. Another key challenge is ensuring that the group represents the people being served by the child welfare system, which requires intentional effort to reach and include people with different lived experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives, particularly those who are disconnected from traditional engagement opportunities.

Logistical barriers are also a significant consideration. These can include transportation, scheduling conflicts, access to technology, and other practical factors that may prevent people with lived experience from participating consistently or fully. Addressing these barriers requires proactive planning and a commitment to removing obstacles so that participation is accessible and equitable.

Jurisdictions may also need to be mindful of ensuring that people with lived experience are not simply present or consulted in name only, but are instead meaningfully engaged, with their input genuinely influencing decisions and outcomes.

In addition, there is often a need to align the ideas generated through the co-design process with existing funding structures and policy constraints. This can require careful navigation to ensure that the vision for the YAB is both ambitious and realistic within the current system context. While these challenges are expected, they are not insurmountable. They can be effectively addressed through ongoing co-design, honest and clear communication, continuous reflection, and a willingness to adapt and refine the approach over time as new insights emerge and conditions evolve.



# Overview of the Co-Design Session

A full-day in-person session is recommended for initial co-design. The co-design session is organized into four phases that help to ensure that participants move through Youth Advisory Board (YAB) development in a logical progression. Each phase is connected to specific facilitation activities and corresponding YAB design components. This structure helps participants gradually build knowledge, deepen collaboration, and develop concrete design recommendations.

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## PHASE 1 BUILDING SHARED UNDERSTANDING

This phase focuses on creating trust, reducing power imbalances, and ensuring all participants understand the purpose of the process, their role, and the broader YAB design context.

### Activities include:

- » Opening and Framing
- » Activity 1: Building Lived Experience and Agency Leadership Partnership

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## PHASE 2 DEFINING PURPOSE AND VISION

This phase helps participants define why the YAB exists, what it should accomplish, and how it should influence systems.

### Activities include:

- » Activity 2: Mission and Purpose Exploration
- » Activity 3: Defining Purpose Through Activities

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## PHASE 3 EXPLORING DESIGN COMPONENTS

This is the most extensive phase and aligns directly with the companion guide's YAB design components.

### Activities include:

- » Activity 4: Exploring Geographic Structure
- » Activity 5: Leadership and Governance
- » Activity 6: Membership, Recruitment, and Communication
- » Activity 7: Compensation, Supports, and Reducing Barriers
- » Activity 8: Operations, Logistics, and Sustainability

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## PHASE 4 IDENTIFYING PRIORITIES AND NEXT STEPS

This phase ensures that the work completed during co-design is translated into actionable next steps.

### Activities include:

- » Mission Statement Summary
- » Next Steps and Feedback

# Facilitation Guide: Co-Design Session Activities

This section provides a detailed facilitation outline for a full-day co-design session. Activities are intentionally designed to support participants in working through key Youth Advisory Board (YAB) design components while maximizing engagement, balancing people with lived experience and agency leadership partnership, and generating actionable recommendations.

To support the facilitation process, the following materials will be needed:

- » Name tags and/or name tents
- » Note pads and pens for each participant
- » Fidgets
- » Flip chart paper
- » Markers
- » Sticky notes
- » Sticker dots

Facilitators should adapt timing and flow as needed while maintaining the progression from exploration to recommendation across design components. It is also important to set clear expectations with participants that, depending on how each conversation unfolds, the group may need to move on to the next topic before fully concluding the current discussion. When this occurs, facilitators should guide the group in pausing the conversation and communicate how any topics requiring further exploration will be addressed. This may include follow-up discussions, additional input opportunities, or other strategies to ensure the conversation is completed. This approach helps ensure that all planned design components receive the benefit of in-person engagement while still allowing space for deeper exploration over time.

## OPENING AND FRAMING



### Purpose:

Establish a shared understanding of the session and how it connects to key YAB design components.



### Facilitation Approach:

- » Welcome participants and acknowledge the range of perspectives in the room
- » Provide brief background on the need for a YAB (or redesign effort)
- » Clearly name that the session will inform key YAB design components, including:
  - › Structure of the YAB
  - › Leadership and governance
  - › Membership and engagement
  - › Member compensation
  - › Purpose, activities, and youth engagement strategies



### Facilitator Note:

- » Consider using framing language, for example: “Today’s work will help shape key design components of a Youth Advisory Board. We are not finalizing decisions—we are building a shared direction that reflects both lived expertise and system realities.”
- » Be transparent:
  - › Some decisions may be influenced by funding sources and policy constraints
  - › Not all topics will be fully resolved today
- » Use a “parking lot” for ideas outside scope of the session



## Activity 1

# BUILDING LIVED EXPERIENCE AND AGENCY LEADERSHIP PARTNERSHIP

### Purpose:

Establish a foundation for strong lived experience and agency leadership partnership, which is central to effective YABs.

### Facilitation Options:

#### Option A: Finding Common Ground

- » Purpose: Build connection, trust, and shared understanding across participants by identifying similarities and breaking down role-based barriers.
- » Pair participants, intentionally matching people with lived experience with agency leadership or staff when possible, to promote cross-role dialogue.
- » Provide a clear prompt to guide interaction:
  - › “Identify three things you have in common.”
- » Encourage participants to think broadly (e.g., interests, experiences, values, perspectives—not just professional roles).
- » After pairs identify shared similarities, prompt them to:
  - › Share one unexpected connection with the larger group.
- » Capture and acknowledge these connections to highlight shared humanity and challenge assumptions.

#### Option B: What We Bring to the Table

- » Purpose: Surface and affirm the unique strengths, experiences, and contributions each participant brings to the co-design process.
- » Provide a reflective prompt:
  - › “Today, I bring \_\_\_\_\_ to the table.”
- » Allow time for individual reflection before sharing to ensure thoughtful responses.
- » Encourage participants to name a wide range of contributions, such as:
  - › Lived experience
  - › Professional knowledge
  - › Skills or expertise
  - › Perspectives or values
  - › Personal qualities (e.g., curiosity, openness, advocacy)
- » Invite participants to share their responses with the group.

- » Record all responses visibly (e.g., on a flip chart), encouraging participants to share contributions that have not yet been named so that a wide range of unique strengths is reflected.
- » Reinforce the idea that every participant brings something distinct and valuable.



### **Facilitation Note:**

#### **Highlight:**

- » YABs are most effective when lived experience and agency leadership work in partnership
- » Both lived experience and system knowledge are essential



### **Output:**

Foundation of a strengths-based, inclusive environment, with a shared sense of purpose and contribution among participants.

## Activity 2

### MISSION AND PURPOSE EXPLORATION



#### Design Component:

Purpose, Activities, and Youth Engagement



#### Purpose:

Define how the YAB will influence policy, practice, and system improvement.



#### Facilitation Approach:

- » Introduce examples of mission statements from other YABs (briefly)
- » Invite participants to rotate around the room and respond to prompts



#### Flip Chart Prompts:

1. Who benefits from this YAB?
2. How should this YAB influence policy, practice, or services?
3. What values should guide the work?
4. How should people experience this group?
5. What words describe this YAB at its best?

#### Participants may:

- » Write directly on flip charts
- » Add sticky notes
- » Return throughout the day to add ideas



#### Facilitator Note:

- » Consider providing mission statement examples from other YABs on a handout for ease of reference.
- » Do not attempt to finalize a mission statement during the session. Instead:
  - › Collect input
  - › Synthesize into 2–3 draft options after the session
  - › Share back for refinement and selection



#### Output:

A collection of participant-generated ideas and insights about the YAB's purpose, values, and intended impact, which can be synthesized into 2–3 draft mission statement options for refinement and selection after the session.

## Activity 3

### DEFINING PURPOSE THROUGH ACTIVITIES



#### Design Component:

Purpose, Activities, and Youth Engagement



#### Purpose:

Identify specific activities that reflect how YABs commonly influence systems.



#### Preparation:

- » Conduct a pre-session survey asking participants to rank YAB purposes
- » Identify top 2–3 purposes to focus on during the session



#### Facilitation Approach:

- » Share survey results and explain selected priorities
- » Divide participants into small groups (ensure each group includes lived experience and agency leadership)
- » Assign each group one purpose area and ask groups to brainstorm a list of specific activities a YAB could do to advance that purpose (15 minutes)
- » Facilitate a large group debrief to allow each group to share their ideas and invite others to add or build on what small groups identified (15 minutes)



#### Facilitator Note:

If groups get stuck, offer examples such as:

- » Participating in policy review
- » Training staff
- » Hosting youth-led events
- » Providing feedback on services



#### Output:

A comprehensive list of potential YAB activities tied to prioritized purposes, which can later inform planning, scope of work, or procurement documents.

## Activity 4

### EXPLORING GEOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE



#### Design Component:

Structure of Youth Advisory Boards



#### Purpose:

Examine structural options for organizing the YAB and assess fit for the jurisdiction's local context.



#### Structure Options to Present:

- » No formal organization – instead, a series of statewide or regional events open to all eligible youth
- » Statewide organization only
- » Regional organizations only
- » Combination of State and regional organizations, with regional representatives designated to serve on State organization



#### Facilitation Approach:

- » Provide brief explanation and examples of each structure
- » After each explanation, facilitate discussion:
  - › What would work well about this model here?
  - › What challenges might arise?
- » Capture responses on flip charts (one flip chart for each structure type with columns marked “Benefits” and “Challenges”)
- » Ask participants for reflection using a prompt such as: “What structure best fits your state’s geography and ability to support youth engagement?”
- » Ask participants to consider:
  - › Lessons learned from past efforts
  - › Existing youth engagement opportunities
- » Guide participants to identify preferred structure(s) by providing each participant with 4 sticker dots to represent votes (all 4 can be placed on one option or can be distributed across several)



#### Output:

Clear group preferences and documented considerations for geographic structure.

## Activity 5

### LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE



#### Design Component:

Leadership and Governance; Management and Staffing



#### Purpose:

Explore how leadership roles and decision-making will be structured.



#### Models to Present:

- » No designated officers: all members share responsibility equally
- » Rotating members serving in informal or unelected leadership roles
- » Formally elected officers for a statewide YAB
- » Regional officers who collectively form the statewide YAB leadership team



#### Facilitation Approach:

- » Present models with brief examples
- » Ask participants to move to the model they prefer
- » In small groups, discuss:
  - › Why this model works
  - › What challenges might arise
- » Groups document their discussion on flip charts
- » Each group reports out key insights
- » After small group report-outs, guide a brief large group discussion to connect leadership structure to staffing support:
  - › What kind of staffing or adult partner roles would be needed to support this leadership model?
  - › What responsibilities would staff hold, and what responsibilities should remain with youth leaders?
  - › How can staff support the work without taking over decision-making or limiting youth leadership?
- » Capture key themes to ensure alignment between governance design and the level of support required to sustain it.

#### Facilitator Note:



- » Encourage honest discussion of trade-offs
- » Ensure lived experience voices are included in each group

#### Output:



Identified preferences and key considerations for governance design.

## Activity 6

### MEMBERSHIP, RECRUITMENT, AND COMMUNICATION

#### Design Components:

Eligibility Criteria and Member Engagement; Recruitment and Application Processes; Communication Strategies

#### Facilitation Approach:

- » Present options and examples in short segments
  - › **Part 1: Eligibility and Membership**
    - Age range
    - Lived experience
    - Open case vs. alumni
    - Open vs. formal membership
  - › **Part 2: Recruitment and Onboarding**
    - How youth learn about the YAB
    - Application vs. open participation
    - Role of caseworkers and partners
  - › **Part 3: Communication Strategies**
    - How members stay connected:
      - » Text
      - » Email
      - » Social media
      - » Virtual platforms
- » After each segment, have small groups briefly “huddle” to react:
  - › What works?
  - › What concerns do we have?
  - › What would we recommend?

#### Output:

Initial recommendations across all three areas.

## Activity 7

# COMPENSATION, SUPPORTS, AND REDUCING BARRIERS



### Aligned Design Components:

Member Compensation; Transportation and Travel Support



### Purpose:

Identify what is required to make participation accessible and sustainable for youth.



### Facilitation Approach:

#### Option A: Panel Format

- » People with lived experience each share:
  - › One support or compensation need related to:
    - Stipends or compensation
    - Transportation
    - Technology access
    - Food and basic needs
    - Professional development
    - Preparation and support for participation
  - › A personal or observed example that illustrates why this support is important and how it impacts participation

#### Option B: Structured Presentation

- » People with lived experience present recommendations related to support or compensation needs via slides (refer to the list above in Option A for examples of areas of focus)
- » Pause after each topic for discussion



### Facilitator Note:

- » Reinforce that these recommendations reflect real barriers and are essential for sustainability—not optional enhancements
- » Support the flow of discussion using a respectful, curious tone
- » Invite clarifying questions from agency leadership



### Output:

A prioritized set of youth-identified support and compensation needs.

## Activity 8

### OPERATIONS, LOGISTICS, AND SUSTAINABILITY

#### **Design Components:**

Meeting Cadence and Logistics; Meeting Agendas and Facilitation

#### **Purpose:**

Surface the operational and logistical conditions needed to ensure the Youth Advisory Board can function effectively and be sustained over time.

#### **Facilitation Approach:**

- » Begin by framing the discussion:
  - › “We’ve spent the day designing what this YAB could look like—its purpose, structure, leadership, and membership. This final conversation focuses on what it will take to sustain this work over time.”
- » Guide a large group discussion using prompts such as:
  - › How often should the YAB meet to stay engaged but not overwhelmed? (monthly, quarterly)
  - › What format works best to support participation? (in-person, virtual, hybrid)
  - › What needs to happen behind the scenes to keep the YAB organized and moving forward?
  - › How should meetings be planned and facilitated to ensure they are meaningful and youth-centered?
  - › What challenges might arise in sustaining this YAB over time?
  - › What could help address or prevent those challenges?
- » Capture key ideas and themes that can inform ongoing planning and implementation.

#### **Facilitator Note:**

Keep this high-level—these decisions are often refined later.

#### **Output:**

Key considerations and recommendations related to meeting structure, logistics, and sustainability, including factors that may support or hinder long-term success.

## CLOSING



### **Mission Statement Summary (15 minutes)**

- » Review key themes from earlier brainstorming
- » Invite final additions



### **Next Steps and Feedback (15 minutes)**

- » Explain that facilitators will draft mission statement options for group review after the session.
- » Share timeline for next phases (e.g., drafting, planning, implementation)
- » Explain how outputs will inform design components
- » Ask participants to complete a feedback survey

# Conclusion

There is no single “right” way to design a Youth Advisory Board. The most effective YABs are those shaped by the voices of those they are intended to serve, in partnership with agency leaders and staff who are committed to meaningful collaboration.

A well-facilitated co-design process creates the conditions for this partnership to take root. By investing time in shared planning, states can build YABs that are not only well-structured, but also relevant, sustainable, and impactful.



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