

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/walking-the-walk-on-youth-partnership>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I began my career by serving in different settings as a voice for system-involved youth on advisory boards and oversight committees locally and nationally. In that short time, I've noticed that youth engagement, while well-intentioned, can fall into avoidable pitfalls.

Some youth engagement efforts are superficial; they include a small number of young people (sometimes only one) in reform conversations through advisory boards, taskforces, or councils to create the appearance of meaningful partnerships. This might happen because an organization is mandated to include youth for compliance with a policy or they include youth to validate that their work is being developed with someone with past experience at the table. In both scenarios, young people are not seen as experts. Their knowledge and skill set is limited to their story. Once the story is heard, the professionals move on to continue in their decision making.

Other efforts for youth engagement are often well-intentioned but not well-executed. This happens when system stakeholders want to offer opportunities for youth to voice their opinion but they do not thoroughly plan in advance. Organizations may not provide compensation or other incentives to the young person involved. Youth are asked to speak before large audiences without basic supports (i.e. money for travel, food, and clothing). Additionally, well-intentioned youth engagement may fail to realize that speaking about past, painful, and/or otherwise violent experiences could very well lead a young person to relive past trauma or damage their future opportunities.

Both of these limited types of youth engagement can tokenize youth and place young people in uncomfortable positions rather than empowering them and using their expertise to inform policy. Youth are important stakeholders whose voices, opinions, and ideas must be valued in the same ways as professionals involved in justice reform work.

That is why I am excited to be part of a team working with the [Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice](#) (IDJJ) to establish a Youth Advisory Board (YAB). Vera is helping IDJJ avoid the potential pitfalls of youth engagement by ensuring that it is executed well and meaningfully. The year-long project, funded by the [Public Welfare Foundation](#), plans to hire a young person in a full-time paid position to lead the recruitment, organization, and sustainability planning for the YAB. This board will bring together a body of young people who have come into contact with the aftercare arm of the IDJJ. The goal is to create a platform for YAB member voices to inform policies and practices, and suggest new ways for young people in Illinois to successfully transition from a facility to their community.

This work in Illinois represents a crucial shift in the field from engagement to partnership. Keep an eye on Vera's blog for updates as the project progresses.

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