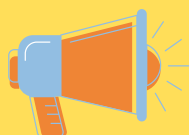




YOUTH JUSTICE
ACTION MONTH



JUSTICE IS OURS!

YJAM Toolkit: How to Create a Youth-Centered Policy Roundtable



NATIONAL
JUVENILE
JUSTICE
NETWORK



Join us this Youth Justice Action Month to create policy roundtables, and shape solutions to some of our most pressing youth justice challenges.

First established in 2007 as Youth Justice Awareness Month, or YJAM, the month of October serves as a way each year to raise awareness about the effects of the justice system on young people. In 2016, Youth Justice Awareness Month was renamed Youth Justice Action Month, with the hope that legislators, advocates, youth, community members, and governing bodies could create change together. YJAM empowers young people and youth allies to take concrete action.

It is in this spirit of building concrete action that we have compiled this guide. The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ) and the National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN) join together this YJAM in calling on youth and their allies to come together and create policy roundtables in their states and communities.

This guide outlines the key steps and considerations that partners should take as they plan and carry out these roundtables. It is based on our organizations' learnings and experiences in hosting a similar policy session on October 27, 2022, in partnership with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

That event, entitled "What Youth Justice Means to Youth: A Vision for the Future," brought together 23 youth from 12 states to meet with OJJDP Administrator Elizabeth Ryan and other OJJDP leadership to share policy recommendations from young people with lived expertise in the youth legal system.

These recommendations covered a broad range of topics from reentry to the need for community-based alternatives to incarceration.

Some highlights include:

"[We recommend] [p]roviding grant funding so young people can transfer to a community facility before they're released. The goal of these facilities would be to gain job experience and build wealth so they are ready financially to live on their own. Youth should receive support in gaining employment, understanding bank accounts, and other essential life skills." ELC Policy Recommendations to the Administration, page 7.

"Congress should ensure access to mentors for all youth before demonstrating at-risk behaviors. Funding for mentoring should prioritize programs that are community-centered, culturally competent, and accessible to youth before legal involvement. To achieve this, we recommend focusing programming in schools and communities [on the] most systematically disenfranchised, with a percentage of funds reserved for schools with the highest percentage of referrals to the youth legal system." Redesigning Justice: NJJN Youth Action Agenda, page 5.

We have compiled this guide in hopes that young people and policymakers across the country can engage in similar roundtables to create lasting and meaningful change. Our hope is that the guide can be used by youth organizations, advocates, and State Advisory Groups.

Register Your Event

Register your YJAM event with us at bit.ly/YJAM_RegisterYourEvent.

“Having the opportunity to speak with OJJDP was such a beneficial experience. As a highschooler, not only was it amazing to be able to speak my truth to such a prestigious audience, but as an advocate, it was so worthwhile being able to hear about the passions of others. This policy roundtable was fantastic and I definitely left knowing so much more than when I walked in,” Myla Roundy, CJJ Emerging Leaders Committee Member.

“I am excited to see what OJJDP will do with our recommendations. This experience makes me feel like my voice is being heard and that changing the system is possible,” Ron Ackerson, CJJ Emerging Leaders Committee Member.

“I felt it was important to share my thoughts with OJJDP during YJAM last year because enough time had passed since my encounters with the criminal punishment system. To be more elaborate, I have the language, knowledge, retrospection and mental capacity to effectively articulate and share my experiences - not only share my experiences, but help provide ideas and solutions to the problems I've witnessed due to my experiences.” Nicky Ishaak, NJJN Young Justice Leader.

"As an advocate for youth justice this experience gave me hope that slowly our systems are changing and as a person it made me feel so much more connected to our lawmakers but also to the amazing youth who participated in the roundtable as well. It felt as though we all had one thing in common: we had done something wrong or society didn't want us because of a mistake we made or the conditions we were in, but quickly we became a community. We educated each other, shared experiences, and made our voices heard." Isabella Lane, NJJN Young Justice Leader

GETTING STARTED

As a first step, consider who your partners will be for this event. Identifying partners for a policy roundtable can seem like a difficult process, but you are likely already connected to youth and youth serving organizations. Developing these relationships is key to creating a strong foundation that brings together youth-serving organizations and child advocacy groups with individuals who have lived experience. The following sections will help guide organizations through the steps needed to ensure that their policy roundtables are successful.

If you are a youth-led organization that is leading and planning a policy roundtable, consider reaching out to your state's Juvenile Justice Advisory Group and NJJN member organizations to participate. Juvenile Justice Advisory Groups help advise their Governors on policy issues in the youth legal system. NJJN members, meanwhile, serve as important on-the-ground advocates in each state. Contact information for the advisory group in each state and territory can be found [here](#) and NJJN member organizations can be found [here](#).

Why Involve Youth?

Youth are powerful agents of change, capable of forming sophisticated policies for state or federal partners. System-impacted youth are experts in the day-to-day operations of facilities, have extensive knowledge on prevention, and are reentry specialists, all without realizing it. Youth have a lot of tools, knowledge, and expertise, and should be a valued member of the decision-making process.

SAG = State Advisory Group (names vary by state)

How to Identify Youth?

- Consider connecting with the NJJN Member contact for your state.
- Consider reaching out to a Youth First affiliate in your state to connect with youth-led policy organizations that could participate.
- What connections do youth members of your SAG suggest? Reach out to them to see what they recommend.

Connecting with and engaging youth who have experiences with any system can be challenging, and bringing youth into projects may require extra effort. Youth who have been involved with the legal system often experience extreme forms of power dynamics, which can have long lasting effects and leave youth feeling powerless. Unfortunately, many have had their trust violated by adults on whom they were encouraged to rely. As a result, youth may be hesitant to form quick and easy relationships with adults, and SAG leaders or other partners that are a part of the roundtable, will need to consistently demonstrate compassion and consideration in order to change that perception and overcome barriers. Power dynamics can exist in peer groups, family groups, and between line staff and youth in placement. They exist in this situation as well. For this reason adult allies that are on the policy roundtable must be conscientious of the barriers and obstacles that exist and develop strategies to overcome these issues.

Supporting Youth in the Process

First and foremost, youth who are invited to participate in the policy roundtable should be paid for their work and contributions to any related events, written documents, meetings, speaking opportunities, and other professional gatherings where adults are being paid for the same work. Compensating youth can be a difficult field to navigate if your organization is not set up for compensating young people as consultants. For more information on youth compensation see ["Youth Compensation: Challenges and Solutions."](#)

Other steps are also needed to assist youth and understand the barriers that youth face when participating in events or meetings. Young people can face a variety of challenges to equitably participate. Young people fill many roles in their home lives apart from students and advocates. Some young people may have children or take on a care provider role, and may need assistance finding babysitters or home health care for medically needy family members. If young people who are invited to participate are minors, staff and partners involved in the policy roundtable should take an active approach to involving parents and seeking their permission for young people to participate. For a sample permission form, click [here](#).

Here are a few ways that adults can support youth:


- Providing transportation to and from events.
- If events are all day, include meals.
- Youth should have a mentor or appointed staff who can meet one-on-one with them to help them understand their roles, answer questions, and help youth prepare for meetings.
- The payment process should be simple, transparent, and provide for payments or reimbursements to be made quickly. Apps such as PayPal can help facilitate instant payments.
- Be an active and attentive listener. If you are asking youth for feedback, be open to it even if the feedback given from youth is not what is being sought or may not feel comfortable to receive.
- Be willing to learn how to communicate with young people and engage in meaningful conversations. Oftentimes slang or even skills learned through facilities or out of home placement do not always translate well to living back in their home community.
- For more information on supporting youth, see ["Respect Youth Stories: A Toolkit for Advocates to Ethically Engage in Youth Justice Storytelling."](#)

What Organizations Will Participate?

Consider inviting partners based on these important questions:

- What topics will be discussed?
- Are there areas that you would like specific feedback on or are you open to a more general policy discussion?
- What type of feedback and input are you hoping will be involved in this discussion?

Identifying the answers to these questions will not only help to identify what partners may be the best suited to engage in your event, but also help set reasonable expectations for those who are involved.



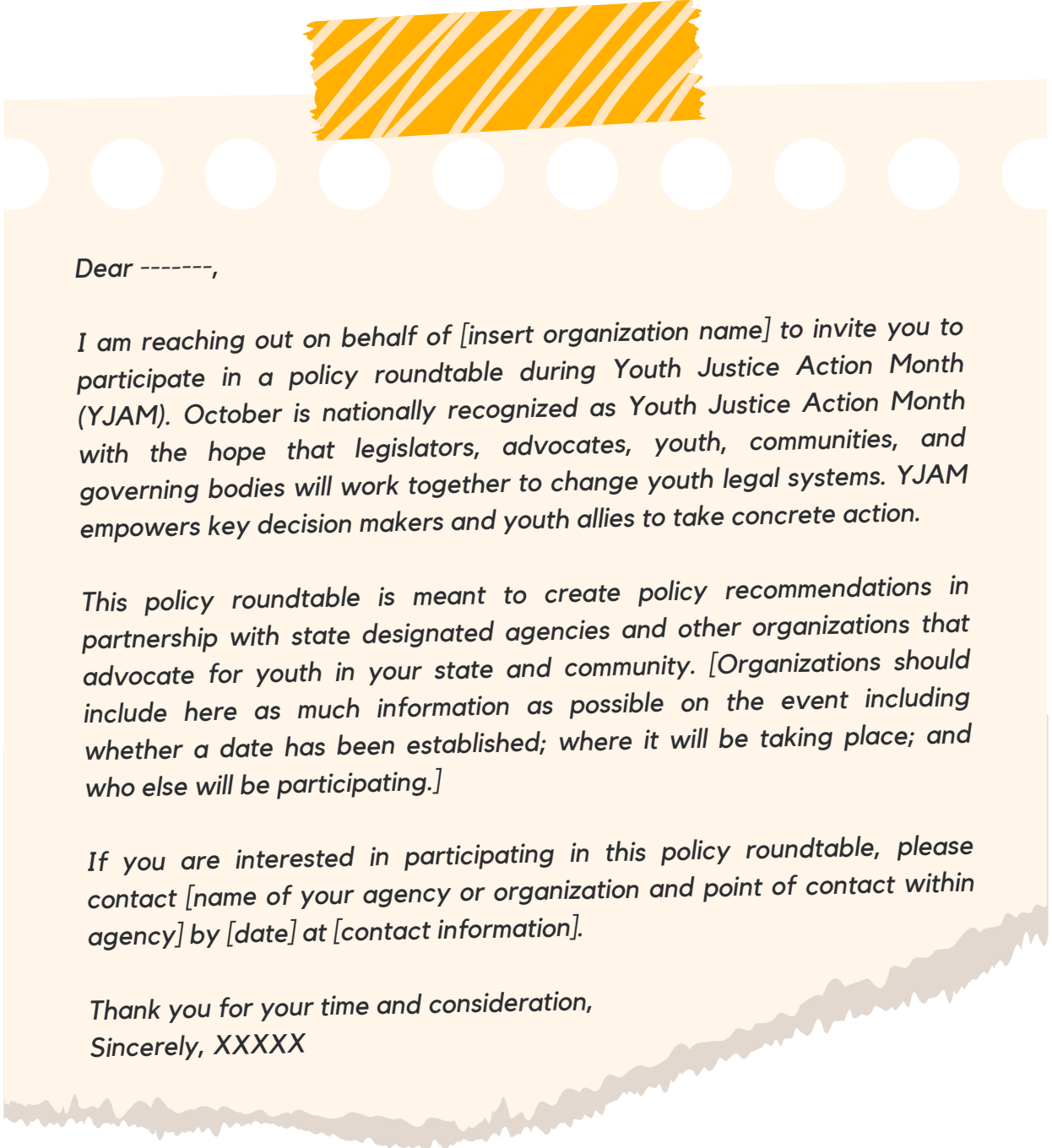
Target of Influence: A target of influence is an organization or individual that may have differing viewpoints, and have the potential to be influential in advancing policy recommendations.

Engaging targets of influence allows for a more comprehensive understanding of potential challenges, and their perspectives can help shape the policy in a way that addresses concerns and finds common ground.

For adult partners, asking for feedback is a great way to gain different perspectives and ask important questions such as 'how will this be implemented'? Working professionals who draft policy may have difficulty identifying problematic areas for youth who are directly experiencing issues.

They may also have trouble understanding the unique struggles that individuals in the youth legal system face. Policy roundtables with youth create an opportunity for these adults to hear feedback first-hand from young people.

Once you've identified who you will invite, consider using the sample invitation text below:



Dear -----,

I am reaching out on behalf of [insert organization name] to invite you to participate in a policy roundtable during Youth Justice Action Month (YJAM). October is nationally recognized as Youth Justice Action Month with the hope that legislators, advocates, youth, communities, and governing bodies will work together to change youth legal systems. YJAM empowers key decision makers and youth allies to take concrete action.

This policy roundtable is meant to create policy recommendations in partnership with state designated agencies and other organizations that advocate for youth in your state and community. [Organizations should include here as much information as possible on the event including whether a date has been established; where it will be taking place; and who else will be participating.]

If you are interested in participating in this policy roundtable, please contact [name of your agency or organization and point of contact within agency] by [date] at [contact information].

*Thank you for your time and consideration,
Sincerely, XXXXX*

Key points to consider: Framing the conversation can have benefits and drawbacks. Asking for feedback on specific topics can make follow-up and tangible action more feasible, but could be perceived as frustrating if there is a topic that youth deemed critical that isn't up for discussion.

Holding an Introductory Meeting:

Are the individuals who are joining the policy roundtable part of an already established group, or is this a newly formed team?

If you are a new team, your first meetings may focus on introductions, gaining an understanding of why you're interested in the youth legal system, and identifying what assets you bring to the team. You may also want to share your previous experience in the policy field.

Here are a few activities or exercises for first time groups:

- Introductions and icebreakers.
- Setting group rules and expectations of partners.
- Identifying opportunities for youth led participation based on interests of the youth members of the group.

Brainstorming

Adult partners and allies should take into consideration schedules, prior commitments, and availability. If most of the youth members are in school Monday through Friday from 8 AM - 5 PM, meeting every Tuesday at 3:30 PM will prevent young people from participating. Youth who have terms of probation or are in an out-of-home placement may need someone to advocate on their behalf and require permission to participate. Consideration should also be given to whether the group will meet in person or remotely, and which method is easiest for the young people. Making sure that everyone can be at the brainstorming session, and actively participate, is key in group decision making.

Google Jamboards are a great tool to help collect ideas, gather input, and shape content in virtual spaces. In addition, Jamboards can be accessed throughout the project and can provide flexibility for partners who may not be

able to attend all meetings, but would like to participate. Another alternative is traditional brainstorming sessions with easels and sticky notes in situations where participants are gathering in person.

When brainstorming, consider asking your group:

- What, if any, parameters were given for the conversation? For example, was the conversation framed as one about probation reform? Were you asked for feedback about decarceration strategies? Reentry? Was the goal to talk about the youth legal system broadly? It's helpful to keep your goal at the forefront of discussions.
- What challenges exist in the current system?
- What obstacles have you witnessed through your experience or those of your friends?
- Based on what you've identified above, what topics are important to you?

Everyone in the group should have a space to share and be heard. There may be multiple people who are interested in similar topics. There may also be people with unique interests. This is a great time to make sure everyone's voices can be heard and respected.

Planning the Roundtable



WHEN?

Early in the planning stages, it's important to decide on a time and date for your roundtable. Having a clear date in mind that reflects your state's legislative sessions, partners' schedules, and target audience is important to consider when selecting a date and time.

Consider having your event in October as a way to recognize YJAM!



WHERE?

Identify a space that will be comfortable for everyone in attendance, accessible for all participants, and large enough to accommodate your full group. Event spaces should also be able to accommodate AV or other technical aspects such as virtual attendance. Providing opportunities for virtual participation for those who cannot attend due to travel limitations and time constraints is important.

If you have a young person who is on probation, for example, they may not be able to get permission to travel. Young people who are currently incarcerated have valuable expertise as well, but may not be able to meet in person. Other participants, meanwhile, may be stuck due to business travel or other demands. Virtual options are great tools to ensure that those who are most directly impacted by the system can be present and engaged.

What other tools do you need to make this event successful? Will you need microphones? Microphones can help quieter speakers be heard better in loud spaces. If virtual participants will be allowed, what platforms will you use, and what sound system and display will you be using? Will you have enough time to do a tech run before the event starts? Finding answers to these questions in advance will benefit your event.



Who will be invited? In addition to youth advocates, SAG members, and NJJN sister organizations, what other staff from state agencies should you invite?

When shaping your outreach list consider the following:

- If recommendations focus on probation for example, the Chief of Probation may be a good invitee.
- Judges could be good to include if you are talking about trauma-informed courts.
- School administrators may be important if the conversation will focus on the school-to-prison pipeline.
- Will the media be invited? If they are, how will you help prepare speakers? If minors are speaking, what waivers or consent forms would be needed? Have presenters had strategic sharing training?

When scheduling, consider what other partners you might want to invite. This is a decision best shared by youth and adults who will be involved. Some partners for these two groups to consider inviting could be: legislators, representatives from OJJDP, and others who share an interest in improving outcomes for young people.

Drafting Your Agenda

You'll need to decide if your event will include only a policy roundtable, or if you would be open to pre or post-events such as informal networking opportunities, or other ways to create space and connect with one another between adults and youth? Consider whether to include a meet and greet session, lunch, or learning-based trivia games such as Kahoot! Oftentimes an icebreaker can be used to help young people and adults feel more at ease before the event starts.

Who will have a speaking role?

Think through who will have a speaking role during the event. Do all youth members want to speak, or are there some who would prefer a listening role? Will they share time equally? Does each person want to cover a separate topic? What about the adults in the room? Will there be speaking roles for key dignitaries, the SAG, NJJN members, and state agency staff? Will there be time included for questions and answers? If so, how will young people prepare to navigate those questions?

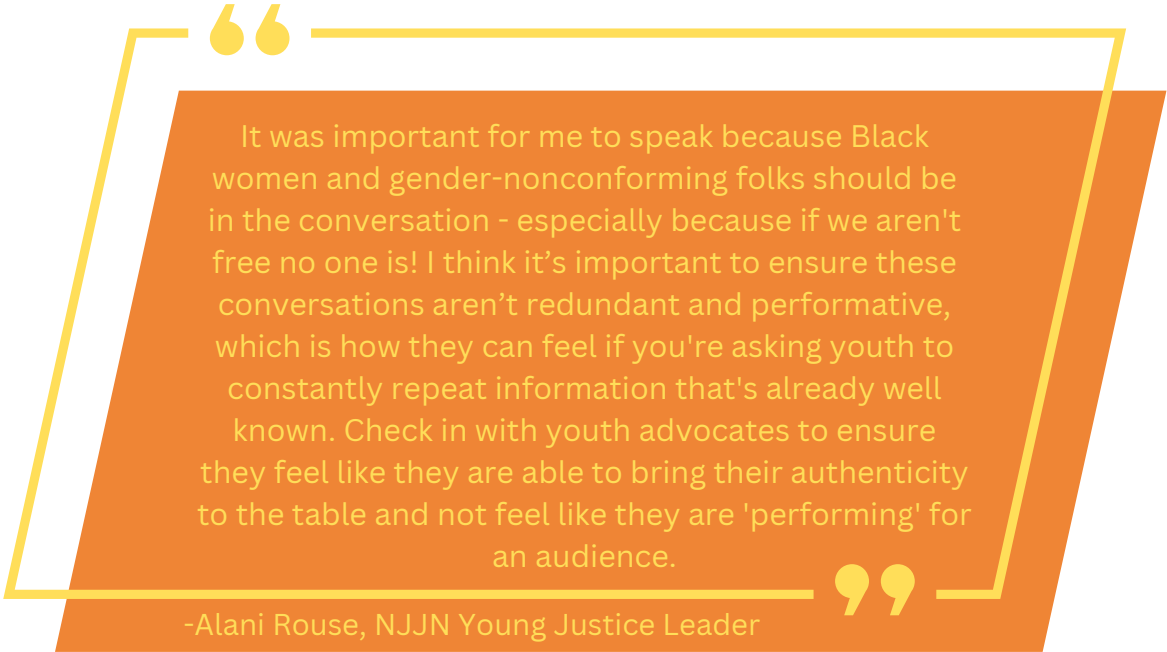
Key point to consider: when developing recommendations, play to the strengths of partners. A certain partner may have a preference for drafting policy rather than sharing their own experiences. Young people are not obligated to share their experiences.



Youth Voice is the most powerful tool available to reform and reduce the amount of youth in our legal system. I was so excited to see my peers have a platform to share their hopes and ideas this past Fall! I chose to support peers instead of participating during the policy roundtable and being able to feel that energy as an audience member is powerful. Seeing follow through sparks that energy and reminds us that change can happen when we bring youth voices and decision makers together.



-Erin Condon, Emerging Leaders Committee Member



It was important for me to speak because Black women and gender-nonconforming folks should be in the conversation - especially because if we aren't free no one is! I think it's important to ensure these conversations aren't redundant and performative, which is how they can feel if you're asking youth to constantly repeat information that's already well known. Check in with youth advocates to ensure they feel like they are able to bring their authenticity to the table and not feel like they are 'performing' for an audience.

-Alani Rouse, NJJN Young Justice Leader

Identifying member roles helps with planning and creates space at the table for everyone to participate in meaningful ways. SAG members, NJJN members, state agency staff, and youth advocates should have roles and responsibilities that are clearly defined.

Generally plan on one to two hours for your roundtable. Grouping speakers by topic can be an easy way to decide who will speak first and in what order. For example, during the roundtable hosted by NJJN, CJJ, and OJJDP, multiple young people were interested in reentry and prevention. Young people who were interested in these topics were placed next to one another.

A moderator may be helpful to remind people who is speaking next.

Given time constraints, you may not be able to discuss all of your recommendations. Decide if you want to try to cover each recommendation, or provide printed or electronic materials to share information that isn't covered. Set a strategy as a group for how to use your time. At the roundtable hosted by CJJ, NJJN, and OJJDP, each person was given 3-5 minutes to speak on the topics that were most important to them. Some people chose to use this time to discuss one recommendation while others chose to discuss multiple recommendations.

Expectations

Expectations of results from this work are important to discuss. Youth can become frustrated when nothing happens as a result of work or when it feels like it takes too long. Other partners invested may only be able to assist with resources for a limited time or as their budgets allow. SAG staff or NJJN members may need to discuss personal goals, group goals, and the policy roundtable's goal.

Developing Recommendations

Once challenges have been identified what solutions would you suggest?

Recommendations made should fall within the scope of authority of the people or agency with whom you are meeting. For example, if you are meeting with a state legislator, they may have both the ability to introduce key reform bills and support important program funding. If you are meeting with your State Advisory Group, they have important roles in making recommendations to their Governors, providing funding, and establishing a three-year plan on youth justice in their state or territory. Because of these different scopes of authority, your recommendations could and should be different depending on the audience. If young people are passionate about the intersections of the youth legal system and dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, for example, school organizations and training providers are key stakeholders to include in the policy roundtable so they can hear youths' recommendations.

For youth who are participating, it is important to identify concrete and actionable recommendations as well as methods of implementation. This ensures that policymakers, administrators, and youth justice staff understand what specific changes youth have identified, how these changes can be achieved, and how they will impact communities.

Youth may also want to consider whether you will focus on one recommendation, or make several. There is no wrong answer on whether to include one key request or multiple recommendations for change. This is a decision that should be centered around young people and their areas of interest. Further into the process, young people can strategically partner with community stakeholders, the SAG, and/or the NJJN member organization.

For example, CJJ's Emerging Leaders Committee focused their recommendations on four key priorities: (1) Ensuring equity in the justice system; (2) Reducing the number of young people who become involved with the justice system; (3) Ensuring that young people who do come into contact with the system receive effective rehabilitative services; and (4) Providing reentry supports for young people who are returning to their communities.

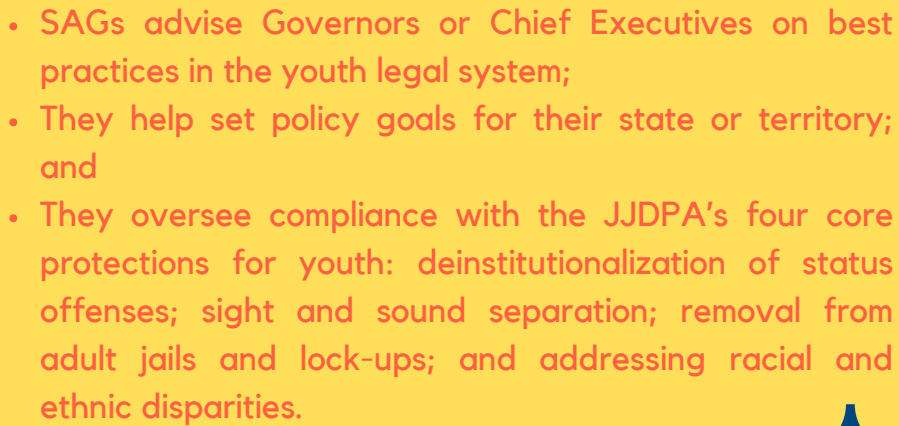
NJJN's Young Justice Leaders developed their recommendations around the theme that the foundation of justice is equity, opportunity, restoration, prevention, and abolition. Specific recommendations included ensuring that every young person has a mentor; increasing investments to support school and community-based mental health services; decriminalizing status offenses; and shifting investments from prisons and residential facilities to culturally and linguistically appropriate community-based programs and mental health care services.

Below are some examples of recommendations that your group might consider:

- Recommending funding for reentry programs to support youth returning to their communities.
- Requesting that the SAG include community-based supports as priorities in their three-year plan;
- Urging the SAG to create a subcommittee to analyze existing or additional data on racial and ethnic disparities to target funding to address this critical problem.
- Creating alternatives to corrections by empowering communities, shutting down youth prisons, and repurposing them into youth resource centers where young people can gain access to the resources and skills needed to prevent system involvement.

What is the SAG ?

State Advisory Groups (SAGs) were established under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP). SAG members are appointed by the Governor or Chief Executive of their respective states. While the names these groups go by can vary from one state or territory to another, their core functions remain the same:

- 
- SAGs advise Governors or Chief Executives on best practices in the youth legal system;
 - They help set policy goals for their state or territory; and
 - They oversee compliance with the JJDPa's four core protections for youth: deinstitutionalization of status offenses; sight and sound separation; removal from adult jails and lock-ups; and addressing racial and ethnic disparities.

States that participate in the JJDPa are required to establish and maintain a SAG. Each SAG has between 15-33 members, at least 20% of whom must be under the age of 28 at the time of appointment. Additionally, at least three members must have some form of system experience, or if not feasible, be the parent or guardian of someone who has been or currently is in the youth legal system.

Connecting with Other Agencies

If recommendations are outside the scope of the SAG's authority, reaching out to related agencies may be necessary. Organizations may want to consider making connections to other state entities if there are topics that are outside your authority that youth have expressed interest in or made recommendations regarding. This could include connections with a state's education department, health and human resources agencies, housing agencies, and others.

For more information on finding your state or territory's Juvenile Justice Advisory Group, please visit the [Coalition for Juvenile Justice](#). For information on finding an NJJN member in your area please visit the [National Juvenile Justice Network/Our Members](#) website section.

Final product:

The final version of your policy recommendations can take on different forms. They may be visual representations, or text-based depending on your preference, or the information you're trying to convey. For example, if your policy recommendations included a statewide data collection method to gain a better understanding of youth demographics, visual representations may be better than a text-dense report on current demographic trends.

Physical or electronic formats are also important to consider when developing final products. Digital copies of recommendations can be more easily shared among networks and social media rather than mailing a printed version. Having printed material at your event, meanwhile, may make it easier for people to access information during your roundtable.

Please consider having final products that can be shared via social media or text. Effective marketing materials and final products related to the policy roundtable are easily shareable, accessible, and easily navigable.

Indiana Roundtable:

The Children's Policy and Law Initiative of Indiana (CPLI), an NJJN member organization, hosted "Youth and Policing: A Roundtable on Trauma and Resilience for Meaningful Change" in Central Indiana, a 2-day virtual event, on August 28 and 30, 2021.

The Roundtable engaged over 160 individuals, including youth providers, educators, law enforcement, youth justice officials, the legal community, public policy officials, and community leaders, to listen to a diverse group of approximately 25 young people in Central Indiana who shared their experiences regarding school discipline, school policing, and community policing.

The youth voices included high school and college-aged youth, many of whom served on the planning committee, as well as several young people who had experienced youth justice involvement. The forum created an opportunity for stakeholders to work with youth to identify problems, solutions, and action steps that the Indianapolis community should undertake to move toward achieving safe and healthy community environments that promote healing and resiliency for youth who are experiencing and suffering from trauma.

Based on the Roundtable discussions, CPLI released a Report with seven overarching recommendations to decrease office referrals, suspensions and expulsions, and arrests in schools and to improve the overall interactions between police and youth in the community.

How Will You Share Policy Recommendations?

How will you share policy recommendations during the policy roundtable? During YJAM 2022, OJJDP staff were seated next to each other around an open table. Accommodations were made for other attendees (seated behind the meeting table) and virtual participants were able to join through Webex and were displayed on a large screen. Through this strategic placement youth advocates and OJJDP leadership were able to participate in this policy roundtable as equals.

As a point of reference, make sure that young people and adult allies are placed in equal positions to avoid either group having a power advantage over the other. If you are going to have a panel, having youth and adults at the same height and tables can level the playing field. Seating youth and adults in separate groups or alternating between young people and adults both have advantages and disadvantages, and opinions can differ. Ask members about their comfort level at seating. You may experience a young person or adult that may not be comfortable sitting next to strangers.

During the event

Set yourself up for success. Practice what you will be sharing, show up on time, and consider making index cards or notes to help familiarize yourself with the content. Frequent check-ins with partners and youth advocates before the event can help reduce anxiety or worries related to the event.

Participating in active listening is key for adult partners. Taking notes, making eye contact, and asking appropriate questions to help with potential follow-up are all ways that adults can support young people at the table.

Consider rounding out your event by sharing next steps and action items.

Key items to cover include:

- When should the groups expect to hear back from the state officials and policymakers?
- Will there be a follow-up meeting?
- How will recommendations be used?

Follow-up

There are several items to consider after the event:

- Send thank you notes to the young people who participated and/or to the state official you met with. This is a good opportunity to reiterate any specific tasks that you made, provide any supplemental material, or follow up on the status of action items.
- Consider setting up a check-in date for the future to keep the relationship going and check on progress regarding any tasks that you made.
- Set up a time to discuss internally how you think the meeting went and what you learned from it.
- Share your event and recommendations on social media using #YJAM2023. To learn more about YJAM's Policy Roundtable recommendations click on [Coalition for Juvenile Justice's Emerging Leaders Committee](#) or the [National Juvenile Justice Network's Youth Action](#) to access final versions of their policy recommendations.



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