Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority

Anishinabe Youth Network

Youth Council Toolkit

For Adults

For further information, contact:
Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority, Approaches to Community Wellbeing
youth@slfnha.com | 1 (866) 337 0081| Facebook: AnishinabeYouthNetwork

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Greetings from Riley Yesno

Member of the Prime Minister's Youth Council

My name is Riley Yesno and I am an Eabametoong First Nation band member. I live in Thunder Bay, Ontario where I attend high school. I sit on The Rainy River Youth Council, am a member of the Board of Catholic Education, Neechee Studio youth liaison, public speaker, member of The Prime Minister's Youth Council, and most notably, a 17-year-old girl working to highlight topics surrounding Indigenous equity, and erase assumptions about people my age. My work, particularly with the Prime Minister's Youth Council, has allowed me to share my voice with Canada's change-makers, and taught me valuable life skills/lessons; including the importance of youth councils and committees.

I am of the firm belief that many young people in this country do not need to be given voices, but rather, given platforms to share these voices and have them be heard. The young people of today are tomorrow's surgeons, scientists, politicians, artists, and innovators. Thus, it is essential to take time to help facilitate their development. As a young person, I cannot stress enough the importance of feeling that your opinion matters. Knowing you hold incredible potential, and are capable of evoking change, is monumental knowledge for a young person. It can positively alter one's outlook on their own abilities. By exercising the use of a youth council, you not only strengthen one's capacity to recognize alternate ways of thinking, but nurture the drive, passion, and intellect, that so many of today's young people possess. Beyond that, providing a setting for young people to come together, collaborate, and reason with others, teaches tolerance and respect, along with public speaking abilities. By investing time into young people you invest in the future.

In regard to the prosperity of First Nation youth, a topic that I am immensely passionate about, the implementation of youth councils/committees for this demographic could not be any more essential. Take a moment. Off the top of your head, name any Indigenous scientists, news anchors, cabinet members, professors, A-list actors, or trailblazers. I have a hard time doing so, and this is the very problem. Indigenous youth need to see representation in society's most important sectors. How can you succeed when you have no one who is like you to look up to? When neither you nor your peers are listened to? When you are repeatedly stigmatized, looked down upon, and not taken seriously? You can't. And unfortunately, this is the reality for so many Indigenous youth. The first step to fixing this issue is to teach these young people that despite the adversity they may face, they matter; and so does their voice. Give youth the opportunities and platforms to be the ones to fix this need for representation.

To summarize, I wholeheartedly believe that without youth councils, community groups, and adequate representation, we cannot ensure a prosperous future for this country, and we miss an unparalleled opportunity to grow together. I owe a lot of who I am and my success to youth-oriented programs and I want nothing more than for each child, especially each Indigenous child, to grow up with the same support systems and favorable circumstance that I have had. Amongst all of the negative assumptions about young people, I hope that we will be able to look beyond, support our youth, and see the true nature of this generation: passionate, intelligent, driven, innovative, and very, very important.

This toolkit provides background information on the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority and Approaches to Community Wellbeing, and a step-by-step guide to get you started on building a youth council in your community. It provides some tips and tricks, as well as some ideas on what your youth council might look like. This toolkit was designed to help start a Youth Council, advocate for a Youth Councillor, or to help you improve the Youth Council already operating.

This toolkit is designed for adults. If you are a youth reading this feel free to continue, but there is another toolkit that you may find useful. If you would like a copy of the youth toolkit please contact SLFNHA below, and they would be happy to send it your way.

The information contained in this toolkit was written for First Nations Youth with feedback from First Nations youth. Throughout this toolkit we will refer to worksheets and examples that are at the back of the toolkit. Feel free to copy these, or edit them as needed. There is also a list of other toolkits on page 12. Many of these have similar steps, and go into a lot more detail. Since many toolkits already exist with a ton of information on the ins and outs of starting a youth council we have made this short and sweet.

If you have any comments or suggestions to make this toolkit a more effective resource for young people, please let SLFNHA know. Should you need more help definitely check out some of the links or do not hesitate to contact a Youth Facilitator at Sioux Lookout First Nations Healthy Authority:

1 (866) 337 0081
youth@slfnha.com

Like us on Facebook at Anishinabe Youth Network

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About Approaches to Community Wellbeing

Approaches to Community Wellbeing is a regional Public Health model that is governed by First Nations. What does that mean? It is a plan for promoting wellbeing and preventing illness in the First Nations communities that surround Sioux Lookout. It was made with a lot of community feedback and with a lot of help from community leadership in order to fit the needs, values, and priorities of the First Nations communities of this region. It is an adaptable system that can be changed to better fit the needs of each community.

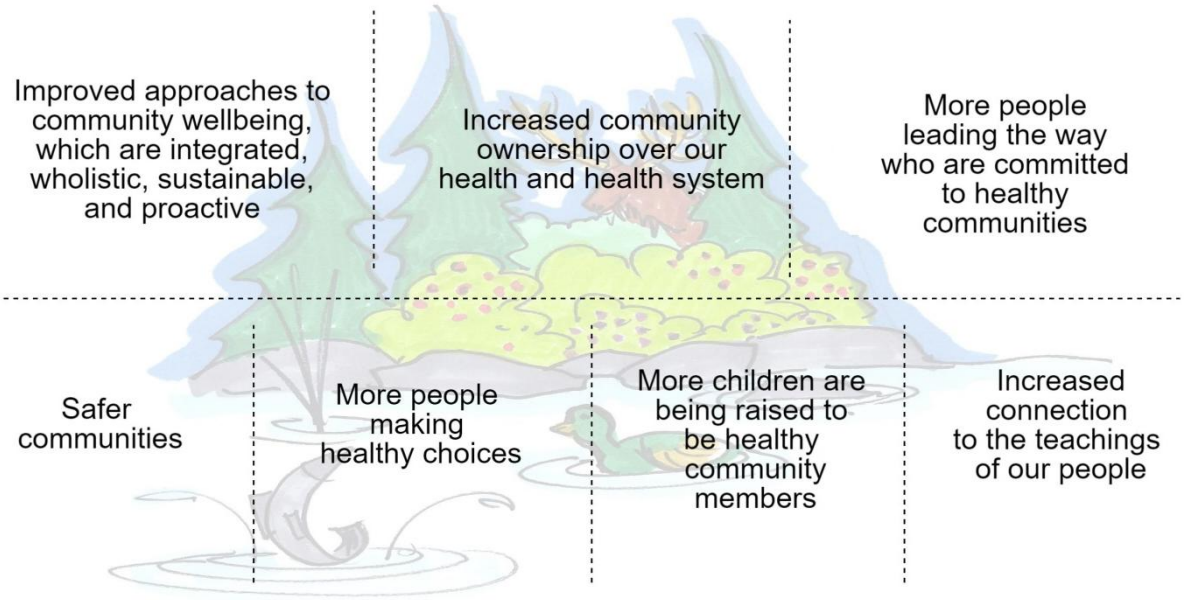
The vision for Approaches to Community Wellbeing is

The Anishinabe people of this land are on a journey to good health by living healthy lifestyles rooted in our cultural knowledge.

The values are:

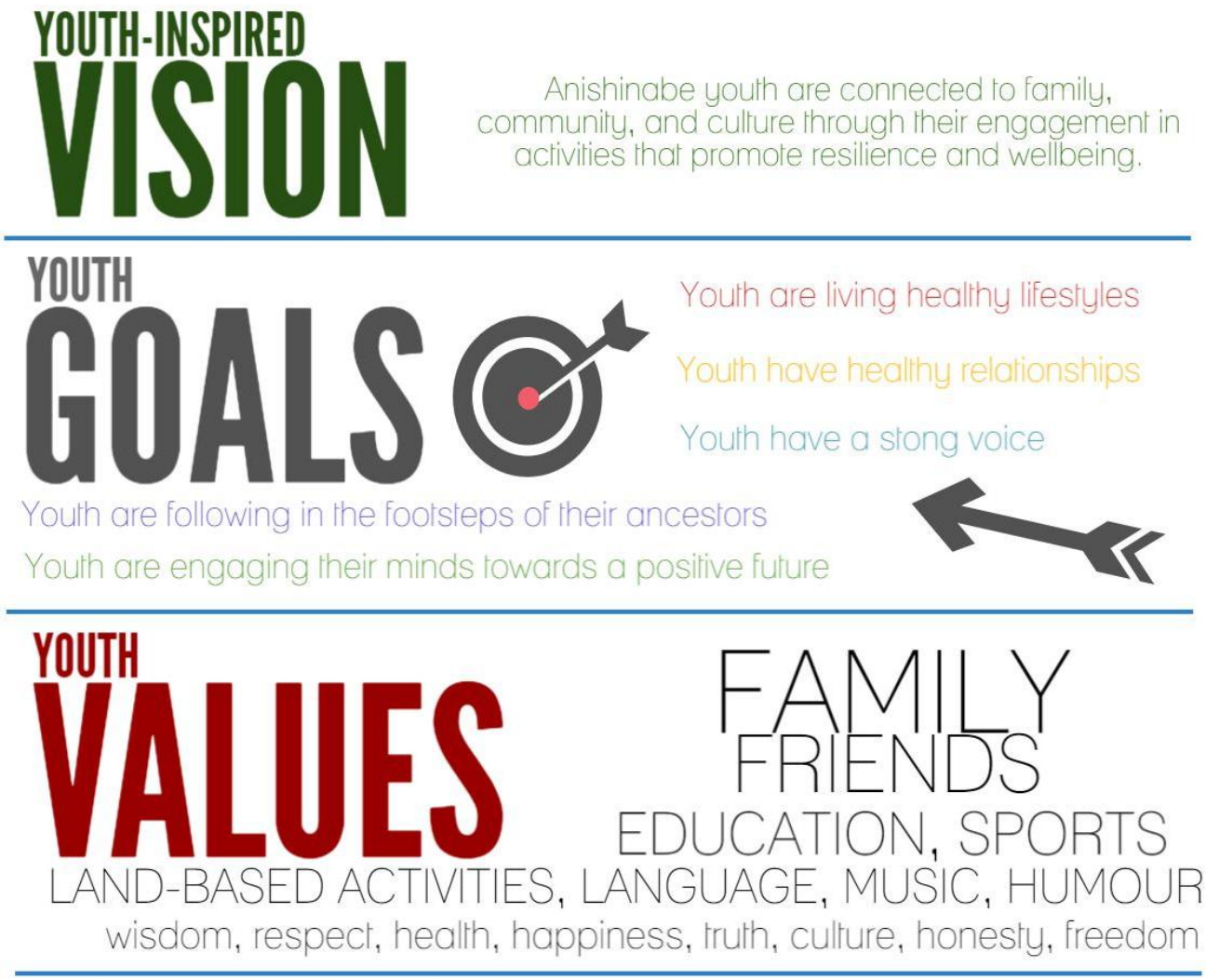
The Teachings of our People, Language, History, Family, Wholistic,
Honour Choices and Respect Differences, Share Knowledge, Connection to the Land,
Supportive Relationships and Collaboration.

The Goals are:



History of SLFHNA Youth Development

During ACW's engagement with communities it was clear that communities wanted more for their youth. We decided to start by asking youth what they wanted in their communities. Through various youth engagement initiatives, including community and school visits, we collected the youth voice and came up with a unique vision, set of values, and set of goals for Youth Development in this region.



What is a Youth Council?

A Youth Council is a group of young people that provides a voice for youth in the community. Youth Councils are often associated with the Chief and Council in order to give recommendations and guidance around issues that are affecting young people. They might advise the Chief and Council on different issues, or attend council meetings to speak out about concerns. The exact structure and activities of the Youth Council will look different from community to community. Youth Council members may focus less on advising the Chief and Council and focus more on acting upon issues that are import to them or running activities and events within the community. Youth Councils can be stand-alone groups or communities may decide to have a youth position on their council (see Youth Councillors below).

Quick Point:
A Youth Council is a group of young people that provides a voice for youth in the community.

Youth Councillors

In cases where communities want a youth voice for community decisions but only a few youth are interested, another option is to create council positions for youth. This will allow for a youth voice to be heard. This would have to be organised with the Chief and Council. A sample letter is provided at the end of this document to help in requesting a youth councillor position be created.

Why a Youth Council?

The knowledge and passion of young people should never be overlooked. Youth have a ton of energy and unique ideas, and when put to use, amazing things can be achieved! Youth know what's best for them, and have the power to solve issues and concerns within their community. If you are a young person looking for an opportunity to voice your opinion and make a difference, we invite you to use this toolkit however you see fit and get in contact with us if you need any help along the way.

Quick Point:
How you define "youth" is up to you and the youth interested. Some say youth starts at age 12 and ends after high school or as late as 30.

Role of Youth Allies

A Youth Ally is an adult that works closely with youth and helps facilitate their engagement. Youth Allies understand the impact youth can have and work to harness that passion and creativity. Youth Allies advocate for a youth voice where there currently is none. Adults often have different audiences than youth; be sure to listen to the youth you are in contact with and tell every one of their wants and needs. Try to generate support from other adults; the more people interested in mobilizing youth the better!

Youth Allies may choose to champion a Youth Council. There are some responsibilities that come along with this very important job, including supporting and mentoring the Council. For example, you may assist with setting up meetings. This might include arranging meeting

space, printing agendas, taking meeting minutes or organizing food. During meetings it is your job to help bring ideas to reality. Youth have fantastic ideas! They think outside the box and have a lot of creativity. This means you have to have creativity as well in order to take these ideas and figure out how to take action. Use your resources and experience to make seemingly wild ideas a reality.

Being a Youth Ally can be time consuming and takes a lot of effort. Spending time with youth and finding out what they think, what they want, and teaching them how to do their work better is not easy. We hope this resource will help make championing a Youth Council as easy as possible.

Questions for your First Meeting:

1. Why do you want to start a Youth Council?
2. How much time do people have to participate?
3. What events would you like to see in your community?
4. What resources do we already have?
5. What skills do people in the group have?
6. How can you get more people involved?
7. What do you hope to gain from this experience?

Where to Start

1. Getting started

Start by talking to youth. Tell them about your idea and ask if they would like to be involved. You could start by asking the school to present this idea to classes, at an assembly, or over the speaker during morning announcements. But note that youth are more likely to commit to a program when they are approached by groups or individuals who they are familiar with. Get the people who work with youth to spread the idea of a Youth Council and see who is interested. Look at your own social networks within the community for support. The more people willing to help and spread the word the more successful your Youth Council will be.

2. Recruit Youth

Start planning a meeting. Be sure to advertise the first meeting to more people by creating a poster or advertising in other ways. Provide food and transportation to encourage youth to come out. Think about linking up the meeting with other things going on in the community. How about getting together right after volleyball? Bring the meeting to the youth rather than asking them to come to you.

Be sure to share your meeting with us if you want your Youth Council meeting posted on the Anishinabe Youth Network Facebook page.

Ground Rules

It is important to set ground rules at the beginning of the meeting. Some examples include:

- One speaker at a time – think of having a system such as a talking stick
- Critique opinions, not people
- Speak honestly
- Keep an open mind
- Honour time limits. Stay on schedule
- Be brief and meaningful when voicing your opinion
- Expect to be surprised
- Whatever is said in the room stays in the room
- Participate 100%
- Focus on similarities not differences
- Have fun!

3. Time to Meet

The first meeting can be as formal or informal as you would like. It can be at someone's house, in the gym after a game, outside, or in a boardroom. Whatever is available to you is fine, as long as you have a group of youth talking and sharing ideas.

You may have to run the first meeting or the first few meetings, but it is important that as soon as possible the meetings become youth-led. Once the youth are leading the meetings then your role is to support their efforts.

The first meeting should focus on planning what the Youth Council is ultimately going to look like. Make sure the youth are coming up with the vision. Try to put aside what you would like to see and have the group talk about what works for them.

Ensure the meeting space is a supportive environment where youth feel safe. This includes both the physical environment as well as practices that enable youth to feel safe and welcome in that space.

Be sure to reduce or eliminate barriers to participation as much as possible. This might mean ensuring a meeting time and place that works for everyone or making sure any costs stay low. Any youth that want to participate should be able to regardless of their current situation.

Once your group has made a plan, the next steps are to carry out the plan.

4. Engaging Youth: Opportunities & Challenges

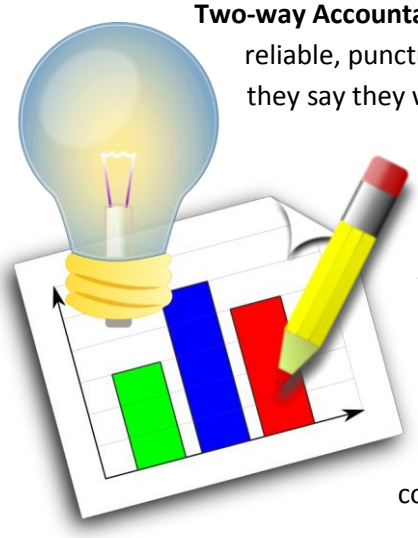
The rest of this toolkit has some things to keep in mind when working to engage youth as well as some challenges and solutions to problems.

Keeping Things Going: Keeping youth interested and engaged is hard. Youth involvement is not short-term. It can take time to get things going, and it takes effort to keep things going. Adults acting as allies should expect a long term commitment in order to build relationships with youth and gain credibility.

Keep things fresh: Get feedback from members on the types of meetings, activities, and projects they enjoy on a regular basis and plan more of them. Try to get together as a group just for fun, to build friendships. Provide a lot of different ways to get involved.

Recruit constantly: Encourage youth to invite friends to meetings and events. Tell people about the Youth Council. Even if people are not interested in joining right now they might in the future. Be sure to welcome and celebrate new council members so that everyone knows they are appreciated.

Set goals and celebrate successes: Make clear goals and take time to acknowledge when the youth accomplish something. Be sure they understand that what they are doing is important and see their progress.



Two-way Accountability: Actions speak louder than words. Youth Allies need to be reliable, punctual, and consistent. Find ways to hold the youth accountable for what they say they will do and find ways to hold yourself accountable to the youth. You should be able to depend on them and they should be able to depend on you.

Focus on the Positives: Explain the benefits of being a part of the Youth Council. This could be the opportunity to travel, learn skills for future employment, make a difference in the community, or make new friends. Find out what talents the youth have and encourage them to use their talents to solve problems. Be sure council members have responsibilities to keep them feeling valued and recognize contributions the members make.

Be nonjudgmental: Youth are unlikely to share their true thoughts, feelings, and emotions if they feel judged. In order to build trust it is important to set a tone of acceptance. This can be tough if youth end up disclosing things that you may see as inappropriate. Focus on promoting positive behavior rather than scolding poor behavior. However, there are certain situations where interventions are necessary.

Flexibility and Innovation: Be open to new ideas, and be willing to take risks to create change. Be sure to hear and respond to youth-initiated ideas. Rather than thinking an idea is impossible, find a way to make it work!

Adult Attitudes: Not all adults understand youth engagement or see how valuable it can be for both the youth and the adults involved. Try to educate opposing opinions on the benefits of youth engagement such as fresh ideas, youth gaining skills, and creating solutions to issues in the community.

TIP:
See the handouts created by the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health for all the ways Adults and Youth benefit from youth engagement.

Poverty: Limited access to financial resources can reduce youth's ability to participate. Consider waiving costs or finding resources to offer activities for free for youth who could not otherwise participate.

Transportation: Providing youth with transportation options will help remove the significant barriers that prevent youth from fully engaging in programming. This might include changing locations or organising rides for youth that will have trouble with transportation.

Childcare: You may need to consider providing childcare as part of programming or make meetings and activities child friendly to reduce these barriers to participation for young families.

Other Commitments: Youth are busy people. They may be involved in multiple activities related to employment, school, peer relationships, family, and community. Sometimes youth need the opportunity to be involved in smaller ways before they can make a commitment. Flexibility is important to be sure everyone can be involved.

Range of Cultural Connectedness among Youth: Exposing youth to cultural tradition and practices can be a positive way to connect them to their past and to nurture spirituality. However, youth may differ greatly in terms of the extent to which they have been exposed to traditional cultural practices and their comfort with these. Ensure that it is up to the youth whether they participate and get feedback on what aspects of cultural identity they are interested in.

Lack of Trust: Successful youth engagement will emerge from trusting relationship between adults and a young people. Do your best to create an environment where youth feel safe and respected. This will help create trusting relationships with adults and other youth will flourish. As relationships build among youth and adults, youth are more likely to commit to greater challenges and opportunities.

Youth's Individual Histories: Some will find it particularly difficult to develop trusting relationships with adults because of their own histories of abuse and trauma. In some cases, trust may develop over a period of time. In other cases, youth may need the opportunity to get support with respect to their victimization and healing before they are able to develop these relationships. It might be appropriate to make youth aware of other available services or facilitate a referral if necessary.

Get Informed: Make yourself aware of the resources that are available in (and outside) your community so you can refer youth to them if they identify to you that they need help.

Congrats! You've finished reading! Now you're ready to get started!
Be sure to review a copy of the Youth Council Toolkit. It can be a great starting point for getting youth involved in the process.

Let the adventure begin!

Other Toolkits and Important Resources

Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority Website
Link: www.slfnha.com

First Nations Youth Council of British Columbia
Link: www.firstnationsyouthcouncil.ca/about/

Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC) Youth Leadership Toolkit
Link: www.ontarioaboriginalyouth.ca/

Rural Youth Working Group of the Ontario Rural Council: Create a Youth Council in your community in 10 easy steps
Link: www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/file.aspx?id=061706a3-2f32-4d2ba38a-a5cf2c24c9ec

Tips for Creating Effective Youth Advisory Councils – Advocates for Youth
Link: www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/1853

The Municipal Youth Engagement Handbook – Federation of Canadian Municipalities
Link: www.fcm.ca/Documents/tools/FCM/Municipal_Youth_Engagement_Handbook_EN.pdf

Youth Committee Toolkit – Nunavut Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth
Link: www.lin.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/nl13.pdf

Tips and Tricks for Starting a Youth Advisory Council
Link: www.mcs.bc.ca/pdf/YAC-Link-web.pdf

Facebook Pages

Anishinabe Youth Network: facebook.com/AnishinabeYouthNetwork

Lac Seul Youth Council: facebook.com/lacseulyouth

Ontario First Nations Young People Council: Facebook.Com/Groups/137018991980/

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