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Youth Advocate to Advocate for Youth: The Next Transition

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**Youth Advocate to
Advocate for
Youth:**

**The Next
Transition**

A large, white, stylized arrow pointing diagonally upwards and to the right, set against a background of orange and yellow diagonal stripes.

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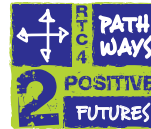
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www.youthmovenational.org
www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu





**Youth Advocate to
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Transition**

Introduction

a growing youth movement across the country has developed a vast number of youth and young adult leaders who are passionate and experienced in sharing their stories to create positive systems change. Many strong youth groups and organizations, authentic youth/adult partnerships, federal grant programs, and research and training centers across the country support this movement. Even more importantly, the movement is sustained by the energy and passion of the young leaders and those who support youth voice.

One primary focus of advocacy across systems has always been the idea of transition. Transition includes the movement from the child to the adult system as well as the transition of youth to adult and the role changes involved. Within this context, young people who have lent their voices

and skills to advocating for positive change within these systems have identified another transition: that of Youth Advocate to Advocate for Youth. Young adults have identified that, as with any transition, this change can be a difficult process to manage. It can also be challenging to understand role shifts into adulthood, and many young adults have struggled to understand this process as it occurs. This guide was developed based on the personal experiences of young people and will clarify some of the questions and struggles experienced throughout the transition.

This guide is intended for young people who have chosen to utilize their lived experience as a mechanism to advocate for positive change. The following seven Stages were identified by young leaders who are at various stages of making the transition from a Youth Advocate to an

Advocate for Youth. The steps are not defined by age or other demographic but instead by personal experience. The transition period will take varying lengths of time for each individual to complete. While this guide may be useful for those anywhere on this journey, it may be most applicable to those ages 15-30 and adults who support youth voice.



stage 1

Knowing, Owning, and Sharing My Story

Successful Youth Advocates have developed, or are in the process of developing, personal knowledge and ownership over their own stories or experiences within child serving systems. Youth Advocates are actively advocating for personal needs in their care and recovery journey. At this Stage, a Youth Advocate has taken on leadership roles and is frequently asked to serve in youth voice roles, primarily by sharing his/her personal story, usually through speaking engagements, panels, positions on advisory councils, and in some peer advocate settings.

It is essential in this Stage that Youth Advocates identify a supportive adult and receive training on Strategic Sharing and Trauma Informed Training.

Youth Advocates should also learn from other Youth Advocates in advanced stages how sharing personal information in a public way can impact young adults personally and professionally later in life. It is also crucial for young people to identify which pieces of their story are relevant to the event, and which parts they are truly comfortable sharing.



RESOURCES:

- * **Strategic Sharing Guide**

<http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbStrategicSharingGuide.pdf>

- * **Strategic Sharing**

<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/StrategicSharing.pdf>

- * **Trauma Informed Care**

<http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/default.asp>

- * **Trauma Informed Method of Engagement (TIME)**

1. <http://www.youthmovenational.org/tools-and-websites>

2. <http://vimeo.com/69269536>

- * **Youth Voice in Policy**

http://www.youthmovenational.org/sites/default/files/pbYouthVoiceInPolicy_0.pdf

- * **Strategic Sharing, Youth Leadership Toolkit**

<http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/publication-db/documents/youth-leadership-toolkit-strategic-sharing.pdf>

stage 2


Beyond Your Personal Advocacy: Being a Resource for Change

A Youth Advocate in the second Stage is actively sharing her personal story. The story is strategically shared, not in tokenism or as a power tool or for personal development, but to empower and promote positive system change. The Youth Advocate has learned to use advocacy skills for personal care needs and has now transitioned to successfully share personal experience to make system change.

Personal stories are powerful and can apply to many topics. However, trying to address too many aspects with a single story can dilute the request for change and the impact made. It is important in this Stage to identify the content areas to which the personal experience most applies (i.e. adoption, foster care, mental health, recovery, substance abuse, LGBTQI2-S – there is no end to the list of potential topics).

This is a time to explore the systemic themes found in an individual story. These questions are answered based on the specifics of a youth's story. Identifying the emotional strengths of an individual's story is important. Impact can be increased when a specific niche is identified. Questions that may be important to explore during this time:

- * What specific story should be told? What is the main message I want to share?
- * Who would be most likely to make change by hearing my story (e.g., peers, policy makers, supportive adults)?
- * What potential does my story have to impact change? What youth populations will benefit from my advocacy (e.g., Homeless youth, teen parents, foster youth)?

- 
- * Where do I share my story to make the most impact? Possible places include community forums, schools, and state capitals.

For example, experiences of a teen mom could include strategies to prevent teen pregnancy OR to identify ways to support teen parents. The same story could address the mental health needs of teen girls and the importance of treatment strategies specific to girls. Implications of foster care and adoption could be discussed, not to mention the impact of peer pressure and education systems on teenage youth.

But to do all of these at one time would be overwhelming and ineffective. The importance of identifying personal strengths and strategies becomes essential. Specific focus areas that may be chosen should reflect personal interests of the Youth Advocate. As a Youth Advocate transitions to an Advocate for Youth, it is valuable, and important for long-term advocacy commitment, to select focus areas that align with interests and passions of the individual.

stage 3

A Fork in the Road: Using Experience Personally or Professionally

A skilled Youth Advocate by now should be comfortable in advocating for personal needs and should be proficient in strategically utilizing a personal story to advocate for system change. Often by this point the primary focus of advocacy has shifted from self to a youth population at large where Youth Advocates can represent not only themselves, but many. These broader implications can be conveyed through not only sharing personal experiences but also by providing statistics about the issue being advocated. Carefully researched and sourced statistics can help illustrate the larger picture and situate youth experience in a larger framework.

It is probable by this Stage and experience level that a Youth Advocate is invited to share and advise on projects outside of his local community. It is also common for a Youth Advocate to be compensated for

her work, often in the form of stipends or honoraria. While this is usually not a primary stream of income for an individual, a young person should be compensated in some way for her time, effort, and expertise. However, many Youth Advocates share experiences and advocate for change without requesting or accepting monetary compensation. It is up to an individual to assess the situation and decide whether to advocate without compensation.

Given the possibility that many people will want a Youth Advocate in this Stage to share his story due to increased experience in speaking, an important question to be addressed during this time is “When do I say no?” A Youth Advocate who has reached this Stage has been recognized as a youth leader in the movement and may well be experiencing an increased influx of requests to advocate on behalf of other

youth and even the systems themselves. The energy levels of a person in this age group should also be considered, as youth who experience burnout may become disinterested in pursuing advocacy and system change work in the future. Their expertise in this area should not be lost so easily.

During this time it is important for youth leaders to gain life skills related to career development, as well as professional skills such as the importance and how to's of networking. A strong relationship with a mentor in this career path would be particularly important. This can also be the point where thoughts and exploration of careers outside of youth advocacy work can start to compete and/or conflict with the path of continuing full-time advocacy.

RESOURCES:

- * **Never Eat Alone** by Keith Ferrazzi
- * **Why Mentors?**
http://www.mentoring.org/about_mentor/value_of_mentoring

stage 4

Maintaining Personal Identity: Staying True to You

During Stages 3 and 4, a Youth Advocate may struggle with self-identity. Transition does not occur without struggle and this questioning process is important for a successful transition. If a Youth Advocate has not yet identified a mentor by this time, now is the time to do so. Finding a Supportive Adult (see Stage 7) to provide guidance through the following challenges supports Advocates for Youth in continuing to create systems change while caring for themselves as individuals as well.

While a decision to more fully embrace a potential role in systems advocacy is being made, it is probable that advocates will struggle with personal identity. The importance of staying true to oneself must be balanced with outside pressure to conform a personal story to a specific audience or cause. At this Stage in transition to Advocate for Youth, a youth leader

may be able to better identify the needs in the field of youth voice and attempt to adapt a personal story to fit that need. However, personal ownership of their story and lived experience can be lost in this process. It is valuable to have training in strategic sharing (see resources from Stage 1) to understand how to maintain sense of self while advocating.

Personal stories are important and experience shapes us, but Youth Advocates do not have to be the stories of their youth for the rest of their lives. Some Youth Advocates will find safety in continuing to share personal experience because they are accepted as experts and are comfortable in this role, while other Youth Advocates may decide to put sharing and advocating experiences behind, potentially refusing to share again, or perhaps choosing a career path unrelated to Advocacy. Even if the de-



cision is made to step out of the Advocate role, Stage 5 (see next page) addresses that lived experience remains a part of life. For those Youth Advocates continuing to advocate, it is now possible to step away from sharing only the personal story and instead advocate for youth as a whole.

It is not unexpected for Youth Advocates to identify concerns about the effect that sharing their personal, lived-system experience may have on their career choices, employment opportunities, and personal lives in the future. Many Youth Advocates have successfully transitioned into careers both within the system and outside the system. Please be aware that positive youth/adult partnerships will help create balance throughout the advocacy transition. Also know that in our experience, Advocates for Youth are continually stating that sharing their stories in personal and system advocacy has provided them with a skill set that is valuable in today's workforce.

stage 5

Experience Never Leaves

Eventually there becomes a hard line in systems where an individual is no longer considered a youth. This usually occurs at a specific age, be it 18, 21, 26 or 29. When this age is reached, Youth Advocates need to transition out of the youth voice role, either by exiting from providing youth voice into a career role outside of the system or into a systems-affiliated position as an Advocate for Youth.

It is vital to remember three primary things in this phase:

1. While an individual may no longer be providing current youth voice at this Stage, lived experience is always valid;
2. Remember to pair personal experience with current youth voice; and
3. A Youth is more than his "story."

A Youth Advocate is his "story" but also much more. Balancing the desire to follow a personal life path with the desire to continue advocating is one of the key tasks of this Stage. As many have learned, this is easier said than done. Often, such a strong personal and professional identity has developed by this Stage that a sense of loss is experienced during the transition to Advocate for Youth. It is important for Advocates for Youth to engage the younger generation to ensure a continuity of youth voice (see Generation Next™). Identification and mentorship of Youth Advocates is critical to sustaining a continued successful presence of youth voice. Becoming a mentor can be a rewarding experience and offers an advanced and continued contribution to the youth movement, and allows Advocates for Youth to continue to be a vital resource to the youth movement.

Accepting and understanding that life involves creating balance, this may be a point in the transition where a decision is made to work on another area of life, such as creating a family or increasing life focus on hobbies or wellness. Important messages from those who have moved beyond this Stage include that it is okay to take a break from the advocacy work and come back to it at a later date. Lived experience and the difference youth voice in advocacy has made in the system for many young people and adults cannot ever be taken away. Many young people transition from advocacy to a different career field, starting a family, developing additional hobbies, or becoming leaders and administrators in other areas of system development.

RESOURCES:

- * **The Adolescent Brain**
http://jimcaseyyouth.org/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Adolescent%20Brain_prepress_proof%5B1%5D.pdf

stage 6

Arrival of an Advocate for Youth

An Advocate for Youth's importance lies in being able to understand the needs of Youth Advocates as well as the needs of adults and systems, and then being able to "translate" back and forth between the two. This Stage can be difficult because it is sometimes hard to tell which role is being played. The role can also change depending on the event or the topic addressed. The skills gained from youth advocacy are applicable to other employment situations and positions held. A Youth Advocate will always have understanding and compassion for young adults with system experience. We do not lose this even if we leave the advocacy field.

As Youth Advocates transition into advanced leadership roles, it is also critical to have continued support and mentorship as many of these young leaders transition to director, administrator, and executive roles.

While many skills learned from advocating are applicable and carried through to the next phase of life, it is especially crucial for young adults to have continued support and guidance in this transition as there are many new skill sets that need to be developed in these more advanced leadership roles.

Another key component of this phase is to identify and engage the next wave of youth leaders – Generation Next™. Many Advocates for Youth mentor a Youth Advocate at this Stage.



“ change happens. And it happens to everyone....Transition, on the other hand, is the process that happens inside your head, heart, and gut as you adjust and become familiar with change.”

– FLUX [Foster Care Alumni of America]

RESOURCES:

- * **Guide to Youth Engagement**
<http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/learning-center/publications/Youth%20Leadership%20Toolkit/All>

stage 7

Becoming Supportive Adults

The role of Advocate for Youth is a perfect fit for those freshly transitioned into adulthood. This role can be maintained throughout life, through yet another terminology shift and another Stage. This is the Stage of being a Supportive Adult. A Supportive Adult can be any adult who offers herself as a resource to youth, whether through mentorship, professional development, networking opportunities, leadership coaching, logistical support, therapy, debriefing opportunities – the list goes on.

This is also an important role affecting the relationship between a Youth Advocate and an Advocate for Youth. Supportive Adults may or may not have lived-experience in the system or may not have previously been a Youth Advocate. A person can be identified as a Supportive Adult with no systems experience at all. However Supportive Adults with lived systems experience coupled with the experience of youth advocacy have unique insight to each of these advocacy Stages, an ability to connect via empathy gained from similar lived

experiences, and a complete acceptance of the importance of expert youth voice.

As a Supportive Adult, some key things to keep in mind when supporting Youth Advocates and Advocates for Youth are:

- * Let youth speak first; don't presume to know what guidance to give or what a young person is asking for. Let youth define what they need.
- * Give honest room for a young person to contribute meaningfully and drive the conversation. Sometimes this requires a Supportive Adult to step back from "adult wisdom" and give room for a young person to stumble along (with support) in order to learn.
- * Find ways to let a young person lead, initiate, and take control of his life and story. A helpful way to do this is to ask questions which allow for intellectual and emotional investigation, reflection, and coming to his own decisions.

- * Maintain confidentiality – trust is key.
- * Accept youth where they are; offer unconditional support, allowing the young people to retain their own reality while challenging it in a supportive way.
- * Connect Youth Advocates and Advocates for Youth to each other as well as to additional professional development resources. This connection may involve sharing personal lived experience, similar to what happens in a peer-to-peer relationship.
- * Allow for a genuine connection and sense of caring without asking for anything in return.
- * Understand that youth voice isn't always packaged in a way that adults expect to receive it.
- * Learn to balance professional accountability and support with understanding and compassion for where young people are in their mental, emotional, and professional journey.
- * Turn around and give back.

RESOURCES:

* Permanency Pact

<http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/publication-db/documents/permanency-pact.pdf>

* Foster Club

<http://www.fosterclub.com/>

KEY TERMS

- ★ **Transition** – Movement from child serving systems and youthfulness to adult serving systems and the responsibilities of adulthood.
- ★ **Youth Advocate** - A young person, typically between the ages of 15-25, who utilizes lived experience to educate, inform, motivate, and inspire others in an effort to create positive systems change.
- ★ **Advocate for Youth** - A young adult, typically between the ages of 25-35, who has transitioned from being a Youth Advocate into a role of advocating for youth involvement across individual, program and system levels. This person may still share personal experience, but focus is on supporting Youth Advocates to utilize their voice as agents of change and creating opportunities for youth voice within systems.
- ★ **Supportive Adult** - An adult ally who supports young people in utilizing their voice in systems change.
- ★ **Lived-Experience** - Past participation in human-serving systems receiving services as a child, youth, or young adult (including but not limited to mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, and/or special education) or currently or formerly living with a mental health or substance abuse diagnosis.
- ★ **Youth Voice** - The engagement, representation and application of lived experience of young people in program and systems development and implementation.
- ★ **Generation Next™** - Concept that in order to sustain any youth movement, as Youth Advocates transition to Advocates for Youth, it is essential

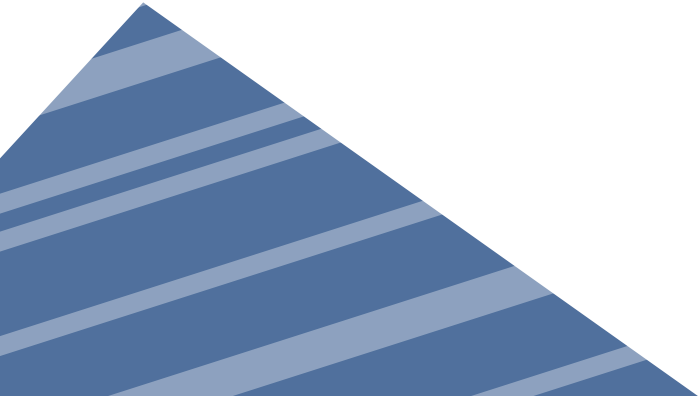
that there is continuous engagement of the next generation. Key concepts in Generation Next™ are shared events and experiences, mentorship, leadership development, and modeling youth-adult partnerships.

***Generation Next™ is a trademark of Youth MOVE National, Inc.*





**Transition is a physical
psychological process**





al, emotional, and

s rather than an event.



– National Resource Center for Youth Development



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