

MIKVA CHALLENGE

Youth Safety Advisory Council Summer 2019 Recommendations



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Mikva Challenge: YSAC Beginnings

The Youth Safety Advisory Council (YSAC) is composed of youth from high schools across the city of Chicago who research, draft and present recommendations to Chicago Police Department Superintendent Eddie Johnson and Officer Vanessa Westley. The council was formed in 2016 after a recommendation from former Mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emmanuel, who decided that youth voice was needed in the Chicago Police Department (CPD). The 2018 YSAC recommended to the Superintendent that each district within the CPD implement a Youth District Advisory Council (YDAC) that has the ability to make recommendations to the district and have voting power on any new district-wide programs. The 2019 YSAC was tasked with making sure the YDACs are functioning as well as possible. This report contains YSAC's recommendations of how to improve the YDACs, based on observations of the first YDAC summer session.

Methodology

This summer, YSAC worked to make these recommendations based on our firsthand observations, conversations with YDAC youth, and interviews. Every Thursday our council split into thirds and went to different parts of the city to observe the YDACs. These areas are called North, Central and South. Located respectively in Hanson Park, Fuller Park and Pullman. YSAC youth would craft agendas earlier in the week and facilitate with YDAC youth together. Every Thursday we would facilitate community building through activities like Story Exchange and Leadership Compass.

Limitations

Some of the limitations to our research were time. Our time with the districts was limited to 5 hours a week, which can be an inhibitor on our research.

Adultism in YDACs

We observed that officers were not sharing the space with the youth participants in a way that was equitable, and that the program was not youth-led as expected. The

officers were the ones leading the discussions and activities, and as a result, the power dynamic between the officers and the young people became greatly skewed towards the adults. This is a form of adultism - a perception of young people as less central to proceedings and less worthy of respect. There is a lack of essential youth training for police officers who oversee programs such as YDACs.

Recommendation

We recommend that the officers facilitating the YDACs undergo adultism training and anti-bias training led by an outside organization. Community Policing officers and YDAC facilitators should be required to undergo training in facilitation. These skills will be actualized in the YDACs.

Implementation

When enacted, this will be included in the guidelines given to all youth officers in the CPD. Going through organizations such as Mikva Challenge would be ideal, as they prioritize youth.

Reasoning

Without essential youth training, officers may knowingly or subconsciously force their views onto YDAC members. YSAC students have observed a significant overlap in the personal opinions that the officers and the students put forth, a problem which exists partly due to flawed YDAC recruitment strategies (see Recruitment section), but is exacerbated by the lack of adultism training.

Officer Facilitators in Uniform

YSAC members observed that in every district, there was at least one officer in full uniform.

Recommendation

We recommend that officers are unarmed when interacting with any YDAC members, and wearing civilian clothing if possible.

Implementation

Ideally, every officer in contact with a YDAC will leave their firearm with someone trusted in the district, or perhaps at a front desk or in a locker.

Reasoning

The youth may be uncomfortable with police uniforms because, depending on their personal experiences with police and guns, they might link the uniforms and guns to past traumatic events. The current YDAC members may not express much discomfort, but youth who don't have previous positive engagements with police could feel uncomfortable or unsafe. The CPD has a responsibility to recruit youth with a variety of opinions regarding the police, and it is crucial that all youth feel equally safe and comfortable expressing their opinions. The purpose of the YDACs is to provide youth with an equal voice in the decision making within their communities' law enforcement agency—if officers come armed, it may trigger a young person's trauma.

A trauma trigger is “a psychological stimulus that prompts recall of a previous traumatic experience. (Wikipedia)” Trauma triggers have the potential to bring back painful and often terrifying memories that can exacerbate mental health issues. When the brain perceives a dangerous situation, it activates a fight or flight response, temporarily hindering normal brain function. The dangerous situation becomes stored in long-term memory, causing one to react extremely to stimulus related to the trauma (National Center for PTSD). Youth may have had such an experience with guns or police uniforms, so in order to create as safe a space as possible, we believe uniforms should be modified for YDAC meetings.

Mission Statements

During the first summer YDAC session, the YDACs were not aware of pre-established mission statements and had no summer question.

Recommendation

We recommend that the YDACs create a summer question during their first day in session. This question will guide their efforts over the course of the summer.

Implementation

To create an effective mission statement, after identifying their core focus for the summer, the YDACs would conduct research on organizations that share their vision or work towards a similar purpose and sample other mission statements to get a sense of what they ought to include.

Reasoning

As a result of not having created mission statements, the YDACs' work and exploration was far less structured than it should have been. There was a general sense of confusion and lack of direction among the YDAC members and CPD officers, which led to one of the main issues observed in the YDACs - a lack of youth engagement and participation. Additionally, the responsibilities of the officers were not stated in clear terms, and the officers assumed leadership roles that may have imposed onto YDAC members and constricted their decision making more than intended (see Adulthood in YDACs section).

A mission statement would allow the YDACs to identify their purpose and the values they adhere to, to state their intended focus and who they hope to affect, and to describe the council's overall vision for their community. Outlining a mission would ensure the councils run more efficiently and that all the participants - both youth members and police officers - are clear on their respective roles.

Payment for YDAC Participants

YDAC members will not be paid for their work during the 2019-2020 school year, which decreases their motivation to regularly attend YDAC meetings and do their jobs effectively.

Recommendation

We recommend that the YDAC members be compensated for their work, whether means receiving a stipend, community service hours, gift cards, or food.

Implementation

Ideally, YDAC members would be paid for their work, but if a stipend is not feasible, incentives can take the form of offering community service hours for time spent at work, or distributing gift cards to popular establishments such as Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks. At the very least, YDAC members should be fed, even if they receive an additional form of compensation.

Reasoning

It is important for youth to be compensated because, like adults, they give up their time to do important and difficult work. Young people who are passionate about working to impact their communities may be experiencing financial difficulties or family issues, so regardless of their passion, they might not be able to commit to serving on a YDAC without some form of material compensation. In Cameron Smith's article on "Should You Pay Your Interns?", she states that "paid interns are happy interns." An overall feeling of happiness for the YDAC members could help the motivation and determination of the students within. Research shows that those who come to work (or the councils, in this case) happy, are more likely to contribute throughout the day than those who are not. Also, happy council members are more likely to promote the "brand" and "culture" of the councils and bring in more youth from across the district. Paying young students such as the YDAC members also begins to teach them how to manage their money. Under One Summer Chicago, they must take financial literacy courses to learn how to manage their money and savings, which is a valuable life skill to have (Cameron). Additionally, YDAC members must be fed, because food is a more tangible incentive that motivates young people to show up on a daily basis, raising their energy levels and making them more willing to stay at work for several hours.

Recruitment for YDAC participants

An issue observed in the YDACs is that the recruitment process is not as far-reaching as it should be. As YSAC members observed YDACs across the city, we noticed that many young people were participants in other CPD programs, like the Explorers program or training academy, prior to joining the YDAC. While this is a good thing, the YDAC members should have many different viewpoints and backgrounds, not just those who had a prior relationship with the CPD.

Recommendation

We recommend that by the next YDAC 'semester', a comprehensive recruitment plan will be created by CPD leadership and approved by YSAC. This recruitment plan should include social media outreach, advertising at community events and going to local high schools. Additionally, the recruits will represent all neighborhoods in the district. A recruitment strategy could include youth that come from various backgrounds, and have varied experience with the police. YSAC will help new YDAC members.

Implementation

The recruitment plan will fit all the criteria listed above and in a document form. This document should be easily accessible by the public online and in plain language.

Reasoning

Many YDAC participants were previously in other CPD youth programs, according to multiple first-hand accounts from YSAC members. Youth programs that have been made with exclusionary standards like no prior arrest record or a 'C' average in school, according to the CPD application. The YDACs and YSAC should target youth of all different backgrounds and life experiences to get a holistic recommendation for whichever district it is.

References

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