

# Connecting Youth and Civic Leadership

Young people play an important role in our communities. In my city, I served as the council liaison to the Lodi Youth Commission. I was always pleasantly surprised and impressed to see so many energetic young people who are engaged in the civic life of their community. During their quarterly presentation to council, our youth commissioners are always looking for ways to give back to the city and make it a better place, and their commitment to civic participation typically continues after they leave the commission. One of our former youth commissioners now works for a U.S. representative in Washington, D.C., and another former youth commissioner ran for Congress.

Like many similar programs in cities throughout California, our youth commission and its Youth Leadership program offer education and training for young people who are interested in becoming future leaders. They participate in mock city council meetings about

topics relevant to youth and experience firsthand the difficulty of making decisions on complex issues that affect many people. City Hall tours and informal talks given by department heads introduce participants in these programs to the essential community services that cities provide.

Empowering young people to create positive changes in their communities is a key function of effective youth commissions and councils. These groups can help bring young residents' best ideas and recommendations to the attention of city policy-makers on a regular basis.

Youth councils and commissions can also initiate educational campaigns and create new community resources for residents of all ages. For example, youth in the City of Manhattan Beach helped design and operate a program that helps seniors navigate their smart phones, tablets and other mobile devices and computers (for more information, see "Manhattan

Beach Teens Help Seniors With Tech Issues" at [www.westerncity.com](http://www.westerncity.com)).

In addition, youth councils and commissions offer a forum that nurtures young voices and fosters civic engagement and citizenship skills. In many cases, this experience provides a young person's first exposure to the role and function of local government.

Youth commissions and youth councils are doing innovative work in communities statewide. If your city does not currently have a youth commission or a youth council, the League and the Institute for Local Government (ILG) offer many resources to help you start one.

If your city already has a youth commission or a youth council, you may want to consider helping its members act as ambassadors to their peers in promoting the importance of civic engagement and the career opportunities that local government offers.

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## Encouraging Youth to Enter Public Service

Young people today, similar to earlier generations, want to make a positive difference in the world. Public service in local government offers many opportunities to do so through an array of interesting and challenging jobs. An ILG publication, *Connecting the Next Generation With Local Agency Careers: Ideas for Encouraging Youth to Enter Public Service*, recommends ways that youth commissioners can learn about local public agency positions and also encourage other young people to learn more about careers in public service. It includes:

- Background on the need for the next generation to consider careers in the local public sector;
- Ideas on how to inform youth commissioners about these career opportunities;
- Suggestions to help youth commissions and local officials inform other young people about local public sector careers;

- Additional resources to help youth commissions learn more about this topic; and
- An appendix with descriptions of local agency purposes, a table to help match personal interests with possible careers, and descriptions of local agency staff positions and career paths.

Even if your community does not have a formal youth commission, local agencies could independently implement many of the ideas presented in this publication or work in partnership with local youth groups and schools.

*Connecting the Next Generation With Local Agency Careers* is one in a series of youth commission briefing papers published by ILG. These free, downloadable briefing papers provide background information and ideas for activities related to topics of concern to young people and their communities.

## The Benefits of Involving Youth in City Planning

This series of briefing papers also includes *Youth Engagement and Local Planning: Ideas for Youth Commissions*. Involving young people in local planning provides several benefits for the community and for youth, such as:

- **Improved plans.** Providing local officials with youth perspectives and input can improve plans, particularly related to the needs and issues most relevant to young people, which may include bike paths and active transportation.
- **Leadership opportunities.** Participating in planning processes offers young people a way to acquire new skills and knowledge and learn responsibility and accountability. It also provides a chance to identify and address issues or challenges that affect them directly.

- **Citizenship and service.** Engaging in the local planning process gives young people a better understanding of local government, community issues and good citizenship.
- **Better use of resources that serve youth.** Obtaining improved information about young residents' interests and needs can help local agencies optimize financial and staff resources directed to youth programs and services.
- **Exposure to careers in local government.** Through their involvement in the planning process, young people learn about local planning and careers in that field. As a result, they may consider a career in local public service.

## Essential Elements of Successful Youth Councils

Youth commissions and councils respond to the issues and community needs of greatest importance to their members. While their success depends on a variety of factors, a few common elements are particularly important.

**Staffing.** It's critically important that staff assigned to youth commissions and councils have a good grasp of the principles of youth leadership, development and empowerment. Nurturing young leaders requires skilled, committed staff with adequate time to devote to the task.

**Diverse membership.** Inclusiveness is a key element of democracy. In youth commissions and councils, it fosters participation, encourages equality and provides credibility. Perhaps most importantly, it gives youth an opportunity to work toward a common goal with others whose backgrounds and experiences differ.

**An appropriate budget.** To become active and effective and fulfill the purposes for which they were established, youth commissions require adequate resources. Beyond support for staff, resources may also include stipends for youth; meeting expenses, transportation and other costs associated with membership, meetings and participation; training and skills

development to build commission competence and confidence; and support for communication, education and outreach to increase youth and others' public awareness of the commission.

**Access to public agency decision-makers.** It's fundamentally important to create an environment where youths' voices are heard and respected. When youth commissions are asked to provide input into actions or decisions of their local government, they must have regular access to appropriate information and the officials with whom they must communicate. Local agency commissions, councils and boards should provide information to youth commissioners and invite their participation.

The staff of departments whose work may be of particular interest to youth commissions should attend and report to commission meetings on a regular basis, and they should invite youth commission participation in their own meetings and decision-making process.

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*Inspiring young people to become involved in their communities and government is essential to the future of strong cities.*



When creating public engagement processes for new local plans, budgets or other initiatives, youth commissions should be asked to help design mechanisms to ensure youth participation.

**Tools to enhance youth commission capacity.** Not all young people have the skills or experience necessary for successful participation. Providing an orientation, information-sharing sessions or training for youth appropriate to the commission's focus increases the likelihood of its success. Topics may include understanding local government, media advocacy, meeting facilitation, public speaking, community mapping, community dynamics, youth-adult partnerships and youth-led evaluation and research.

**Focus beyond youth commission members.** Although a youth commission may be a diverse group of young people acting as the community's "youth voice," one group cannot speak for all its peers. To represent its peers' needs and concerns, a youth commission can conduct communitywide surveys and evaluations to determine its priorities. Broad outreach plays an important part in youth commission success. Holding open forums to invite additional youth participation and input is a great way to strengthen and increase the commission's effectiveness.

### Inspiring a Lifelong Commitment to Civic Engagement

Democracy depends on a foundation of engaged citizens. Inspiring young people to become involved in their communities and government is essential to the future of strong cities and states and the nation. The Ruth Vreeland Award for Engaging Youth in City Government, a category of the Helen Putnam Award for Excellence, highlights California city programs that involve local youth in helping shape their communities. The 2017 winner will be

honored during the 2017 League of California Cities Annual Conference & Expo, Sept. 13–15 in Sacramento, along with the winners in the other 11 categories.

The League created this award in memory of former Monterey City Council Member and League Board Director Ruth Vreeland, who was a teacher and a passionate advocate for youth. The award recognizes programs such as:

- Youth commissions that have maintained active and diverse youth involvement and provided young people a voice in their city's public decision-making;
- Collaborative efforts between cities and other organizations (schools, public agencies, nonprofits, the faith community and the private sector) to inform and engage youth about city issues and their community;
- Projects that promote young people's understanding of local government, their roles and responsibilities as citizens and their engagement in the community in ways that advance this understanding and benefit the community; and
- Improvements in how the student community functions in terms of attitude, involvement, knowledge and the skills of good citizenship.

Be sure to visit the Helen Putnam Award winners' exhibits in the League Partners Village at the 2017 League of California Cities Annual Conference & Expo. Staff from the winning projects will be on hand to answer questions and share information. (And it's not too early to start thinking about applying for a 2018 Ruth Vreeland Award for Engaging Youth in City Government. Learn more at [www.HelenPutnam.org](http://www.HelenPutnam.org).)

### Find Resources, Helpful Tips and Tools Online

The information presented here draws extensively on the resources that the League and ILG offer cities with an interest in fostering youth participation in local government. These include articles,

reports and practical tools your city can put to work right away. For links to these resources, read the online version of this article at [www.westerncity.com](http://www.westerncity.com). ■

### Acknowledgments and Thanks

My term as League president ends next month, and this is my last "President's Message." I want to thank the League board of directors, Executive Director Carolyn Coleman, the League staff and all of the city officials who have worked so hard this year to help us to reach our goals and — after a decade of sustained effort — pass a transportation bill. The League staff is the backbone of our organization, and their dedication and commitment make it possible for us to attain our goals and ultimately serve each of our constituents more effectively.

The League's Executive Committee has been enormously helpful as we worked together with Carolyn to move the organization forward. My year as League president started with the organization hiring Carolyn, who I am confident will lead the League to the next level. Best wishes to League Executive Assistant Mimi Sharpe, who will retire next month.

My sincere thanks to all the League leaders — the department, division, policy committee and constituent group leaders and members — who have contributed to our successes. I'm grateful to my team in Lodi: Steve Schwabauer, Janice Magdich and Jennifer Ferraiolo. And a big shout out to *Western City* Editor Jude Hudson, who always made sure my t's were crossed and my i's were dotted.

Finally, please join us at the League of California Cities 2017 Annual Conference & Expo, Sept. 13–15 in Sacramento, to learn about the latest developments that affect our cities and how we can work together to overcome the challenges before us. (While you are there, make sure to take a short drive to visit my city, "Livable Lovable Lodi," and its wine country.) I look forward to seeing you at the conference.

*Youth commissions and youth councils are doing innovative work in communities statewide.*



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