

MOVING BEYOND A YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP AND YOUTH ADVISORY BOARDS

Maine's Innovative Model of Foster Youth Empowerment & Co-Production

History

In the late 1980s, as states across the U.S. navigated how to implement Independent Living Programs (ILP) to support young people in foster care transitioning to adulthood, Maine began paving the way toward a vision created in partnership with young people. The vision that included a holistic partnership with young people was led by Marty Zanghi, who worked at the University of Southern Maine (USM), alongside Maine's Independent Living (IL) workers, and provided training and technical assistance to Maine's IL workers (now known as Youth Transition Specialists). One of the IL workers, Penthea Burns, collaborated with Marty in 1989 to convene a small group of youth in foster care to plan a teen conference. That simple event grew into something transformative.

The conference, attended by both young people and leaders from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), was a success. Young people, impacted by the realization that they were not alone in their experience, built friendships with each other. Adults gained eye-opening insights about the real challenges these young people were facing and more than that – that these young people could influence meaningful changes in child welfare. What started as a single conference soon evolved into the foundation for what would become today's [Youth Leadership Advisory Team](#) (YLAT) – Maine's groundbreaking model for youth empowerment and leadership that is funded through a long-term contract with Maine's Office of Child and Family Services.



This brief was written by Ahmen Cabral and includes the work of Dr. Jenna Powers' doctoral dissertation research and contributions of other members and supporters of the Youth Leadership Advisory Team.

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The YLAT Model of Youth Empowerment



YLAT emerged as a unique youth-adult partnership designed to improve the experiences and outcomes of young people, ages 14-23, who are in or have been in foster care. Youth participants were clear that a traditional board (e.g., Youth Advisory Board or YAB) with elections, officers, or term limits, would not serve them. They said, “we want to be involved when it’s something we’re passionate about and when our life permits. We also want to be able to step back, when our life demands our attention.” YLAT instead became a more flexible and inclusive structure, ensuring that all youth, regardless of perceived leadership abilities or experience, could participate in its activities and impact.



YLAT values are the fabric of its community and remains what guides the program still today. These values are that each partner pledges to: bring expertise, exercise leadership, change and grow, be included fully, and give and receive respect within the space.

The foundation of YLAT is its monthly district meetings held in various locations across the state. These gatherings serve as entry points where youth can enjoy food, connect with others, and develop their leadership skills organically. For many, it’s a space where they can relax and connect with peers who understand their experiences, which helps to create a sense of belonging. Over time, these meetings also become steppingstones towards additional leadership opportunities, such as panel discussions with various stakeholders, training facilitation, or advisory roles with the [Maine Youth Transition Collaborative](#) (MYTC) through the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

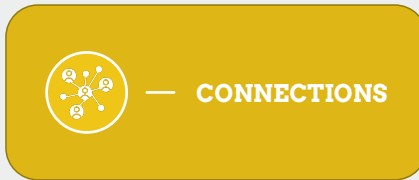


YLAT’s programming has always been and continues to be directly informed by youth input through surveys and ongoing conversations at meetings and events. This approach ensures that the voices of young people shape the organization’s direction and impact. YLAT’s youth-led “data walks,” for instance, provide participants with a chance to reflect on data collected throughout the year, sparking discussions about areas for improvement and actionable next steps. Another recent example when young people expressed the desire to have access to a group like YLAT at a younger age, staff and OCFS created Jr. YLAT, pop-up groups for young people ages 11-13.

National Recognition & Evaluation

In 2023, YLAT was honored as one of four YABs nationwide to be evaluated for its effectiveness and structure. [Dr. Jenna Powers](#), a former YLAT MSW intern, conducted this evaluation as part of her doctoral research, highlighting YLAT's unique features. Unlike many other youth boards, YLAT welcomes all foster youth to attend, creating an inclusive environment where young people can develop their voice and leadership potential rather than already needing the skills to access the opportunity.

The evaluation* revealed four core themes that define youth experiences within YLAT:



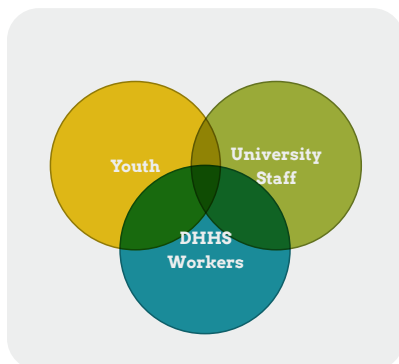
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“These relationships with adults offered confidence in me before I had confidence in myself.”

YLAT MEMBER

Connections

YLAT provides a supportive community where youth can form meaningful relationships with peers and adults who truly understand what it's like to be in foster care. In addition to peer support, YLAT offers consistent, reliable adult connections which is especially important for young people navigating adolescence and foster care. Youth Transition Specialists from DHHS and University staff, who have worked with YLAT for years, become vital pillars of stability in young people's lives. As stated by one young person “These relationships with adults offered confidence in me before I had confidence in myself.”



Youth-Adult Co-Production

The collaborative dynamic between youth and adults in YLAT is key to its success. DHHS workers focus on individual youth needs, building close relationships, while university staff concentrate on YLAT's broader curriculum and advocacy efforts. Together, these complementary roles create a structure that leverages both personal support and professional development. Advocacy efforts championed by both Alumni and young people and supported by USM staff are connected to key priorities identified in YLAT groups such as access to driver's licenses or opening bank accounts for youth under 18.

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“YLAT ... allowed me to see all what things I was good at ... So, all I needed was an opportunity. I didn't know that I needed it because I thought that I was trash. I thought I couldn't do anything. ... And I was given the chance to do so, and I did great. ... I was able to improve myself and be to the point where I feel good about who I am.”

YLAT MEMBER

Inclusivity

YLAT is built on the principle and core programmatic value, that every young person's voice is important to creating transformational change – in their lives and in the system that serves them. Implementation science asserts the importance of leadership at all levels and YLAT demonstrates this. It invites all youth to participate, regardless of their skills or prior experience. Whether a young person is looking for support, seeking to understand their strengths, or exploring advocacy opportunities, YLAT meets them where they are. The program helps foster self-awareness and growth, allowing youth to decide for themselves if they want to pursue leadership roles or elevated advocacy avenues.

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“I had a way to build the skills I needed to like, stand up for myself. I learned my own personal stuff and setting boundaries with every type of person is okay. Saying if I'm not okay with something or if something is bothering me.”

YLAT MEMBER

Personal/Professional Development

YLAT provides a continuum of opportunities that allow youth to grow both personally and professionally. There are many ways that YLAT programming creates and provides opportunities. For example, activities like “strategic sharing,” support participants in practicing telling their story in a safe and impactful way, which helps foster youth gain the confidence to use their voices for change. These exercises also give youth a sense of agency in shaping their own narratives and, by extension, influencing policy and system change. The skills developed transfer into every day opportunities—through their relationships, jobs, and at school.

A Continuum of Opportunity

YLAT's strength lies in its continuum of leadership opportunities, allowing youth to evolve from participants to advocates in a way that honors their unique personalities and differences, ultimately empowering everyone. By offering time, space, and support, YLAT ensures that any young person, even those who may not initially see themselves as leaders, can emerge as powerful advocates in their own lives and the lives of other young people. This flexible model enables the advocacy work YLAT engages in to reflect a broader spectrum of youth experiences.

YLAT Youth-driven Stages of Growth & Opportunity

**Ages
14–23**

- ▶ **Developing** leadership, advocacy, and other important life skills
- ▶ **Building** community, connections to adult supports and other youth with similar experiences
- ▶ **Developing** sense of self and identity
- ▶ **Trying** new activities and practicing skills
- ▶ **Learning** how to strategically share lived experience to education and inform providers and the child welfare system

**Ages
23–26**

- ▶ **Practicing and modeling** leadership, advocacy, and “adulting” skills
- ▶ **Supporting** current youth-in-care as role models and natural mentors
- ▶ **Providing** a voice of lived experience for younger youth in care, speak on panels, advise policy makers, community agencies that work with youth in care
- ▶ **Strengthening** community bonds and relationships
- ▶ **Continuing** to build life skills, leadership and advocacy skills

**Ages
27+**

- ▶ **Promoting and providing** resources and tools for youth in care's growth and healing
- ▶ **Giving back** to the next generation through leadership and advocacy
- ▶ **Reflecting** on past experiences to provide perspective to other youth, (may include service providers, resources, workgroups, etc.)
- ▶ **Modeling** understanding, empathy and patience, use your voice to support youth to understand the purpose of YLAT meetings and opportunities

Conclusion: A Model Worth Celebrating

YLAT is more than a traditional Youth Advisory Board. It is an innovative model of youth-adult co-production that embraces inclusivity, connection, and leadership development. The structure, which is based on collaboration between DHHS, USM, and young people themselves—has proven to be a successful approach to empowering foster youth, fostering leadership, and creating pathways for long-term success for over 30 years.

YLAT’s achievements, that range from the creation of handbooks, to big legislative changes (tuition waiver, sibling visits, extension of care), to programmatic advocacy (Camp To Belong Maine) have inspired change-makers both within and outside of Maine. The investment in the program demonstrates that by meeting young people where they are and believing in their potential, even those who might not initially see themselves as leaders can create lasting, meaningful change on an individual, community and systems level.

YLAT stands as a testament to what is possible when we prioritize youth voices and co-create systems that truly work for them. Maine’s leadership in developing YLAT should be celebrated and replicated as a model for other states.

We hope this sparks discussions about future opportunities for genuine youth engagement and highlights the incredible work achievable through partnerships with young people.

