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Authentic Youth and Young Adult Partnerships: Broadening the Narrative of LGBTQ Youth Homelessness

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Authentic Youth and Young Adult Partnerships: Broadening the Narrative of LGBTQ Youth Homelessness

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Introduction

Lived experience generates knowledge not available through formal education and training. If lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth and young adults (YYA) experiencing homelessness are to be effectively engaged, their needs met, and their successful transition out of homelessness facilitated, they must be partners in the creation of solutions meant to help them. That means that everyone working to address LGBTQ YYA homelessness – including policymakers, government officials, advocates, researchers, and service providers – need to understand how to partner authentically with YYA experiencing homelessness. Prior work on YYA partnerships has identified multiple levels of YYA participation, ranging from approaches that tend toward symbolic representation or tokenism to approaches that are fully youth-initiated and directed (Hart, 1992).

This article will introduce a framework for authentic YYA partnerships, describe the philosophy and values underlying the True Colors Fund's successful partnerships with YYA, and provide examples of how YYA partnerships have informed our work, and as a result the communities we work with. It will discuss how, through the organization's partnerships with YYA, we have recognized the importance of (1) broadening the narrative about LGBTQ youth homelessness to include the various intersecting reasons LGBTQ youth become homeless and (2) moving beyond a single paradigm of risk/victimization to include resilience and possibility. We will present an overview of the issue of LGBTQ youth homelessness, a brief description of the True Colors Fund, and the True Colors Fund's perspective on authentic YYA-adult partnerships, followed by our framework for authentic YYA-adult partnerships and a case study of one of our YYA-adult collaborations, the National Youth Forum on Homelessness. One of our co-authors, Phoebe VanCleeve, is an executive committee member of the National Youth Forum on Homelessness. We asked her to share her thoughts about why authentic YYA-adult partnerships are important. Rather than incorporate her thoughts with our own, we decided to highlight her knowledge as a young adult separately from our collective voice.

LGBTQ Youth and Young Adult Homelessness

LGBTQ YYA are overrepresented in the population of youth experiencing homelessness. Although estimated to comprise between 25% and 40% of the population of youth experiencing homelessness, they make up only approximately 5% to 7% of the overall youth population (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015). LGBTQ YYA experience homelessness for a

range of reasons, some of which are similar to the reasons all YYA experience homelessness, such as family conflict, poverty, and aging out of systems of care. Some unique reasons LGBTQ YYA experience homelessness are identity-based family rejection and exit from systems of care that are not equipped to serve YYA affirmatively at the intersections of gender identity, sexual orientation, and race. Additionally, these systems of care are poorly equipped to meet the unique needs of YYA who have experienced stigma and oppression related to heterosexism/homophobia, cisgenderism/transphobia, and racism (Olivet & Dones, 2016; Choi et al., 2015).

True Colors Fund

Founded in 2008, the True Colors Fund is a national organization working to end homelessness among LGBTQ youth and create a world in which all young people can be their true selves. The True Colors Fund works within communities across the country to develop solutions to prevent LGBTQ youth homelessness and, when it occurs, help to make it a rare, brief, and one-time occurrence. Through the training and education program, we develop and disseminate educational materials and collaborate with professionals across youth-serving sectors to ensure that LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness have access to the inclusive and affirming services they need. Our advocacy program elevates the voices of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness in local, state, and national government and in the media to ensure that vital social services and policy protections are in place to meet their needs. We collaborate with LGBTQ YYA in all our work, specifically through our youth collaboration program, which provides LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness with leadership development and opportunities enabling them to play an active role in creating solutions to address LGBTQ youth homelessness.

Authentic Youth and Young Adult Partnerships at the True Colors Fund

Recent literature explores various youth–adult partnerships in out-of-school programs (Wu, Kornbluh, Weiss, & Roddy, 2016), leadership among youth experiencing homelessness (Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011), and research methodologies led by youth experiencing homelessness (Gomez & Ryan, 2016). The literature emphasizes the importance of authentic youth engagement and collaboration. Similarly, at the True Colors Fund, we believe that YYA not only should be at the table any time decisions are being made about them but also should have an equitable voice in decision-making processes. Several ways this can be

accomplished include developing a YYA leadership body, electing YYA delegates to an organization's board of directors, and/or allowing YYA to act as organizational representatives when an adult is invited to speak about the organization's work. Ideally, YYA should also have opportunities to provide input on service provision plans that will directly affect their housing and supportive services. Collaborating in this way requires an organizational shift, in which adults must be willing to set aside their expert knowledge to make room for the expert knowledge of YYA. This work is not always easy, and it requires intentional practice as well as the setting of clear expectations and the development of effective communication channels.

YYA experiencing homelessness may not be offered the same collaborative opportunities as YYA who are in stable living situations. Adults may believe that because of the crisis of homelessness, YYA are not able to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. This underlying assumption fuels an "us–them" mentality that may be alienating to YYA and perpetuate one-dimensional understandings of YYA experiencing homelessness as "victims of their circumstances," which ignores the strength, creativity, resilience, and possibilities they also possess. Historically, YYA experiencing homelessness may have been taken advantage of or tokenized, even by the organizations that provide life-sustaining support for them. YYA are often asked to share their stories on panels, in the media, or at fundraising events. Although well-intentioned, these kinds of opportunities are limiting if they do not also include YYA ideas for making change. According to Pucci-Garcon (2016), "[a]uthentic YYA collaboration is about more than inviting a YYA to share the stories of their past; it's also about providing the space for them to share their vision for the future." It is also important to be mindful that if not properly prepared, YYA may be retraumatized by the experience of sharing their stories, particularly when the value of their lived experience is profited from without an exchange of information or services.

To partner authentically with YYA, it is crucial to acknowledge that YYA are the experts of their own truth and possess valuable expertise based on their lived experiences. As adult partners, it is our responsibility to elevate their voices in a way that is empowering and nonjudgmental. When we ask YYA to be involved in our organization's work, it is important that we hear them out and build a reciprocal relationship in which their experiences are honored and their ideas inform the partnership process. To begin to assess the decision-making power YYA have in our organization's work, we ask the following questions:

- In what ways do YYA directly affect decisions in our organization?

- In what ways are YYA a part of generating solutions?
- How is our organization benefiting from the value of the lived experiences of the YYA we work with?
- How are YYA benefitting from their participatory experiences available within the organization?

Phoebe VanCleefe, Executive Committee Member, National Youth Forum on Homelessness

Authentic youth partnerships are so important because, as youth, we come with experiences and a level of expertise borne of those experiences. When that expertise is not valued (specifically in work dealing directly with YYA), there is a wealth of knowledge that is overlooked and a point of view that is missing. Fresh, vital information is left out, and then ultimately the work will be lacking. When young people are not given the power and autonomy to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings about something that will directly affect them, adultism is perpetuated. To quote a popular slogan from the Disability Rights Movement, “nothing about us without us.”

Authentic YYA-adult partnerships are especially important for those YYA who experience homelessness, in particular LGBTQ youth. Youth systems created without youth input and assistance rarely reach their desired population. The majority of YYA experiencing homelessness are Black (specifically because of institutional racism). LGBTQ YYA of color experiencing homelessness are marginalized because of both their race and their LGBTQ identities. They have insight that privilege can, at times, blind adults from seeing. In the work concerning youth homelessness, the idea is to create a system that properly serves the most marginalized people, thereby creating a system that better assists all who experience housing instability. If YYA are not affirmed, well equipped, and active partners and collaborators in the systems designed for them, the goal of addressing everyone’s needs will be just an idea.

Our Framework for Authentic Youth Young Adult–Adult Partnerships

The philosophy behind our youth collaboration work at the True Colors Fund is based on the ladder of youth participation of Hart (1992). This framework discusses how YYA-adult–directed programs are designed and operated by both YYA and adults in *full* partnership. It became very apparent that for these partnerships to be fully equal and equitable, we needed to work with both YYA and adult partners. Building trust and breaking down the stereotypes and barriers between YYA and adult partners can avoid problems such as adultism, classism, sexism, and

racism. Using this lens, the Forum developed the following principles guiding authentic youth collaboration at the organization:

<p>1. Build trust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Talk with YYA about the barriers that may have existed in their previous work with adult partners. Hear their suggestions for what will make a successful partnership from their perspective. ● Explore the “-isms” that directly affect LGBTQ YYA experiencing homelessness and successful adult partnerships. These may include adultism, ageism, racism, hetero-/cissexism, and classism, among others. ● Speak openly about systems of oppression so both YYA and adult partners can authentically collaborate as colleagues within a social context that may make the work challenging.
<p>2. Set YYA leaders up for success.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Before asking for input or feedback, make sure YYA leaders have the information they need. ● Provide training for the work they will be doing, whether that is advocacy, public speaking, or program development. ● Create a list of acronyms for local, state, and federal agencies, including their names and the work they do. ● Create a list of system terms and definitions in addition to organizational programs (e.g., transitional living, housing first, rapid rehousing, etc.).
<p>3. Create a collective setting for feedback and input.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give various options for YYA leaders to provide their input and feedback. These may include printing and distributing materials for written responses, setting up and communicating through e-mail, working together on a shared drive or document online (such as a Google Doc), and even using Facebook messenger as ways to communicate.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Regularly scheduled listening sessions are another great way to elicit feedback. In these sessions, the YYA speak and the adults listen.
4. Set deadlines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Set clear and realistic deadlines. Be mindful that YYA have personal lives outside this work. ● Work together on accountability by scheduling milestone dates together, and ask YYA how you can support them in meeting deadlines.
5. Highlight YYA effect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give clear examples of how the input of YYA is influential in the final decision or product. ● Think of both local and national effect.
6. Provide incentives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Compensate YYA for their work. Adults are being paid for doing the same work YYA are doing. YYA should be paid as well. This communicates that their time and knowledge are equally valuable. ● Ensure that YYA have access to transportation to any meetings/engagements they are attending as representatives of the organization.

Case Study: The National Youth Forum on Homelessness

The National Youth Forum on Homelessness (the Forum) is one example of an authentic partnership with YYA experiencing homelessness, including LGBTQ YYA. As part of a national conference on youth homelessness in 2015, YYA were invited to participate by sharing their ideas for solutions to YYA homelessness on the main stage, speaking to the full audience of attendees. Participating YYA expressed the desire for a more robust, consistent presence in national conversations about YYA homelessness. It was in direct response to this request that the Forum was created. Co-hosted by the National Alliance to End Homelessness and the True Colors Fund, the Forum is creating YYA-led change in the national movement to end youth homelessness. The Forum ensures that strategies to address YYA homelessness are generated by YYA and that the national conversation about YYA homelessness is informed by and filtered through the perspectives of YYA with lived experiences of homelessness.

The Forum comprises 20 YYA, 12 general members, and 8 executive committee members, who guide the decision-making processes. Forum membership is open to YYA between the ages of 21 and 27 years who experienced unaccompanied homelessness anytime between the ages of 13 and 25. Membership terms are 2 years, and members are paid for their work. Members of the Forum receive training on such topics as introduction to lobbying and advocacy, leadership styles, professional diplomacy, unified messaging, and crafting an elevator pitch. The Forum's objectives include the following:

- Identify and analyze relevant policies affecting YYA who are at risk for or are experiencing homelessness,
- Assess the effectiveness of interventions geared toward YYA experiencing homelessness
- Provide feedback and input to national organizations in their work to address YYA homelessness
- Advocate for policy and practice at the local, state, and national levels to support YYA experiencing homelessness (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017).

A sample of what the Forum has accomplished thus far includes the following:

- Organized and facilitated the first national convening of YYA who have experienced homelessness, held at the 2016 National Alliance to End Homelessness Children, Youth, and Families Conference;
- Participated in listening sessions with representatives of federal agencies, including the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the United States Department of Education (ED), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA);
- Spoke at the 2016 White House Policy Briefing on Ending Youth Homelessness in a keynote session entitled "Intersectionality: Identities, Experiences, and Solutions";
- Offered feedback and input on the "A Way Home America" transition plan for the incoming administration;
- Led a youth convening at the launch of the 100-Day Challenge to End Youth Homelessness, engaged YYA in each of the 100-Day Challenge cities to track authentic YYA partnerships during the community planning processes, and communicated progress and feedback through podcasts.

What We've Learned

Authentically partnering with LGBTQ YYA with lived experiences of homelessness has changed the way we do our work at the True Colors Fund. In addition to intentionally partnering with YYA in the ways described above, we have also made two primary changes to the way we talk about LGBTQ YYA homelessness. We consistently and explicitly include the multiple, intersecting reasons for LGBTQ YYA homelessness. We have also intentionally moved beyond a single paradigm of the risk and victimization faced by LGBTQ YYA experiencing homelessness to a more holistic portrayal that includes a focus on their strengths and possibilities for the future.

We have learned that the way we talk about LGBTQ YYA homelessness matters. Without meaning to, organizations may perpetuate stigma in the public messages about their work. The thing about these public messages – regardless of the target audience – is that they are heard by many. Public messages from youth service organizations reach more than their intended audience of potential donors, volunteers, or policymakers. They may be heard by YYA themselves, as well as members of the often-hostile society LGBTQ YYA experiencing homelessness must navigate in their day-to-day lives. It is important that our messages do not perpetuate stigma and reinforce half-truths. We are careful not to relegate LGBTQ young people to a single, sensationalized aspect of their experiences. For example, how many times have you heard the message “[young person’s name] was kicked out of his home for being gay, then forced to sell himself on the street”? While this narrative may be true for some LGBTQ YYA, it is not a universal truth. And it is not that YYA’s whole truth. When creating public messages, we think carefully about what the messages are really saying, how they will sound to different audiences, and whether they will reinforce stereotypes about who LGBTQ YYA experiencing homelessness are and who they can become. We ask ourselves, Do our messages instill hope in the receiver (Shelton, 2016)?

Phoebe VanCleeve, Executive Committee Member, National Youth Forum on Homelessness:

It is so important to expand the current narrative of LGBTQ youth homelessness because, as it stands, our current systems often fail LGBTQ YYA experiencing homelessness. This failure is largely due to the lack of understanding around their specific needs. Entire careers and organizations were created with the belief that they could be the one-

dimensional solution to a three-dimensional problem. We have missed so many of the reasons why LGBTQ youth become homeless and, subsequently, missed life-altering chances for true prevention.

There is also a need for a more client-centered empowering approach, as opposed to a victimizing model of care that is found in some places. YYA are resourceful and resilient, and it is so important to build on that. If a young person views a current housing situation as "just something I'm managing" and is not playing an active role in finding solutions, it can hinder progress and can even stir up old trauma. As adults, it is best that we do not take that strength from them and make them see themselves as victims. Fostering growth outside victimhood is key in engaging young persons and further collaborating with them.

Conclusion

LGBTQ YYA with histories of homelessness have been integral in shaping the work of the True Colors Fund. We know that our work is better because of their contributions, and we believe many of the solutions to addressing LGBTQ YYA homelessness lie within their experiences and expert knowledge. The work of authentically partnering with YYA is not always easy and can challenge commonly held (and often unconscious) beliefs about the capabilities of YYA experiencing homelessness. As YYA champions filled with hope about the possibility of preventing and adequately addressing homelessness among all YYA, we hope our framework for developing and sustaining authentic YYA-adult partnerships will be helpful for organizations seeking to partner with the YYA they serve.

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