

# Hartford's Generation Work Initiative Prioritized Youth Voice in Its Youth Advisory Council Perspectives from the Young Legends

Zakia Redd, Isai Garcia-Baza, Sham Habteselasse, Sam Hanft, and Kristin A. Moore

## Introduction

Programmatic efforts to improve outcomes for young people have too often neglected the perspectives of young people themselves in designing programs or making decisions. However, youth-serving programs can establish and involve youth advisory councils to elevate the voices and perspectives of youth and young adults in programming aimed at improving their outcomes<sup>i</sup>. Youth advisory councils are typically made up of a small group of young leaders who meet and work together on specific issues. The focus of youth advisory councils varies widely: They may aim to lift up the perspectives of young people within an organization, school, or other institution with which they might be affiliated, or they may seek to identify and address certain issues facing a community.

In the workforce development sector, in particular, workforce boards have sometimes engaged young people to sit on youth councils, or youth committees.<sup>ii</sup> And in recent years, as positive youth development (PYD) and racial and ethnic equity and inclusion (REEI) approaches have gained recognition, more youth-serving agencies and initiatives have formed youth advisory councils or invited one or more young person(s) to join their executive boards or other decision-making entities in an effort to improve their work. At the same time, the role and true level of engagement of young people who are called “advisors” varies; in some instances, organizations appear to just “check the box” on youth engagement, and young people’s input may not actually be sought or proactively considered.

However, the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Generation Work partnership in Hartford, CT (see text box) has provided an alternative approach to youth advisory roles by inviting active engagement from young adult participants as thought leaders in programmatic decision making. The Generation Work project aims to elevate the importance of PYD as a strategy for employment and training organizations across sectors to

## Generation Work

Launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2015, Generation Work™ aims to connect more of America’s young adults with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them for jobs. As part of the initiative, partners in five sites across the nation—Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Seattle—are working to align various education, employment, and support services to help young people develop the skills required to succeed in the working world; link young adults with employers; and increase advancement and earning opportunities.

By combining employer-facing strategies that are aligned to labor market needs with positive youth development techniques—such as hands-on learning and mentoring—the initiative aims to blend services into more cohesive pathways that promote equitable employment opportunities for all young people.

better support young people's employment readiness and success. The Hartford partnership includes the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, Capital Workforce Partners, City of Hartford, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Hartford Working Cities, Our Piece of the Pie, Workforce Solutions Collaborative of Metro Hartford, and other local partners.

In this case study, we focus on how the Hartford Generation Work local partnership adapted its efforts to more authentically engage young adults by establishing a youth advisory council called the Young Legends to help shape its work; we also discuss the benefits and challenges of the partnership's efforts. We provide examples of ways in which Young Legends has elevated young people's voices and valued and compensated their work, and describe how the Young Legends' input has influenced action and change. Our hope is that the Generation Work Hartford team's lessons learned from working with the Young Legends will help other organizations and initiatives that work with young people to promote youth agency.

## Key findings

In early 2020, Child Trends conducted a site visit to Hartford, CT to gather information for the Young Legends case study. Child Trends analyzed interviews of Young Legends members and of the staff who work to support them. Our exploration of the formation and development of the Young Legends informed several important findings about how youth and adults can collaborate in a PYD framework. These lessons learned can be used by other cities and programs seeking to build networks of involved and effective youth who can influence change.

Five key lessons:

1. The Young Legends, with the support of program leaders and funding partners, felt empowered to make decisions and lead challenging, skill-building activities.
2. Funding partners in Hartford incrementally expanded their priorities to prioritize young people's interests and ideas.
3. Program leaders and funders generally valued and nurtured the young leaders, providing access to employment opportunities and compensating them for their time and expertise.
4. Linking young adult leaders to resources and services helped them navigate personal challenges and participate more fully in their leadership roles.
5. Young people need staff support and connections to resources to address personal hardships that hinder their full participation.

## About this case study

This case study focuses on the formation and activities of the Young Legends, a group of young people who work together to support improvements to economic security and advancement among low-income youth and young adults in Hartford. It also highlights how key Generation Work partners in Hartford—including United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, Hartford Working Cities, Our Piece of the Pie, and Capital Workforce Partners—implemented Positive Youth Development (PYD) approaches to better serve youth and young adults. PYD approaches represent principles for positive interaction, not rules or a curriculum, and are the focus of Child Trends' involvement in Generation Work.

More specifically, the brief describes how funders in the Hartford initiative partnered with youth and young adults to support their efforts to combine two youth advisory councils to create one group called the Young Legends. The strategies articulated in this brief are aligned with each element of the [PILOT tool](#) and demonstrate examples of how to authentically engage with and support young people, prioritize youth voice, promote youth agency, and foster skill-building in areas aligned with their strengths and interests.

This is one of five case studies in a series that examines how local partnerships in the Generation Work initiative have scaled up and supported the use of PYD approaches in programs for young people who seek high-quality training and employment. These case studies grew from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's interest in understanding how the five local Generation Work partnerships integrate PYD approaches in workforce training settings for youth. In turn, this understanding helps generate systematic knowledge about PYD that other workforce training practitioners can integrate into their own programming.

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## Background

The Young Legends, a youth-led group, mobilized to insert their voices into the local political agenda in Hartford. The Young Legends formed from the unification of two youth-led groups: the Young Adult Action Network (YAAN) and the Youth Advisory Council (YAC). Prior to the existence of Young Legends, the two groups worked separately to inform policy and political leaders and contribute to community engagement.

### Two youth advisory councils are jointly trained and find common interests

The YAAN was formed in November 2018, with funding from Hartford Working Cities. YAAN sought to provide young people with opportunities to voice their thoughts on city planning programs that offer youth leadership development, ways to engage in community outreach, ways to inform strategy and systems, and policy decision-making opportunities. Youth group members were particularly interested in addressing two major challenges on the south end of Hartford: 1) lack of access to services and resources and 2) high levels of youth unemployment. Members cited an inequitable distribution of resources between the south and north ends of Hartford, stating that social services were more accessible in the north end than in the south end. Additionally, the group noted that the south end experiences the highest levels of youth unemployment in Hartford. On the specific issue of youth unemployment, YAAN aimed to decrease unemployment rates from 23 percent to 10 percent in three South Hartford neighborhoods: Barry Square, Frog Hollow, and South Green.

YAC was formed on the north side of Hartford in October 2018 with a similar mission to support youth voice in decision-making spaces. With funding from Capital Workforce Partners, YAC aimed to incorporate youth voice into the Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative. The Collaborative is a citywide leadership group with members from the education, youth development, and workforce development sectors who work to address the needs of the city's opportunity youth (young people who were not in school or working). As part of this collaborative, YAC members worked to provide a youth perspective to city leaders and inform decision making related to citywide programming affecting opportunity youth.

YAC and YAAN members were provided resources to both support their unique missions and promote connections with one another. To foster this intentional intergroup collaboration, Hartford Working Cities and Capital Workforce Partners separately contracted with Our Piece of the Pie (OPP), a nonprofit, multiservice organization, to provide youth with leadership training and development, among other services. These trainings quickly became a space for members of YAAN and YAC to engage with each other and build connections across neighborhoods. As the youth strengthened their individual skills and bonds with one another, they decided to form a single group to best promote their interests.

## Formation of the Young Legends

As young adults from YAC and YAAN attended joint trainings, they expressed confusion about why the two groups were separate, given their similar goals. From their perspective, they were all expected to take on similar roles as youth leaders and were receiving training on the same set of topics. The young people were also concerned about the focus of the two groups on separate parts of the city, in which different demographic groups generally reside: One group was charged with focusing on economic challenges facing the north end, which is primarily Black with a large West Indian population, and the other was focusing on similar issues in Latino communities in the south end. Youth were concerned that their separate efforts would perpetuate the artificial north-south divide. One member of the Young Legends articulated this concern:

*“It was two groups, basically. It’s a north end initiative, and then there’s a south end initiative and, no, we don’t want to make it seem like there was any, like, conflict in between, and [as if that’s] why we were being separated. So, we made it to where we all were combined. We made up Young Legends and [that’s what we started] calling ourselves.”*

The YAC and YAAN youth aimed to join forces to better achieve three outcomes: 1) Help bridge the longstanding divide in the city between the north and south ends; 2) resolve discrepancies between the different roles of two groups with otherwise similar missions in a small geographic region; and 3) encourage collaboration and group ownership by developing a new singular group, which would collectively be branded as the Young Legends. One funding partner shared:

*“So the interesting thing about the Young Legends is that they kind of rose up as the Young Legends out of a group that we [Capital Workforce Partners] and Working Cities put together ... it was pretty amazing to watch the youth do this because they realized, ‘It might have been you guys that got us all in a room together, but we’ve got something here, and we’re going to sort of create the Young Legends as our own.’ ... They really kind of established themselves as this autonomous [group]. We [Capital Workforce Partners] didn’t create the Young Legends. Working Cities did not create the Young Legends. The Young Legends created themselves.”*

Capital Workforce Partners and Hartford Working Cities supported the merger, as did OPP. Over multiple meetings, the two groups worked to determine the structure and goals that would best serve the new, unified group and to fulfill their multiple contractual goals. Once these goals were finalized, OPP and Working Cities worked with the initial YAAN and YAC members to select young adults to serve as leaders of the Young Legends and to recruit new members through OPP programming. Recruited members were youth who had previously participated in OPP programs and who had prior leadership or volunteering experience. These youth would then pass through the two-year program of the Young Legends.

## Structure of the Young Legends

The Young Legends model aims to build skills in leadership, decision making, and collaboration. Approximately 24 young people spend two years in the program, with the first year dedicated to training and education and a second year that focuses on applying skills through various opportunities.

The Young Legends model themselves after a nonprofit organization, with both a board and specified roles for staff. Members are part of two separate groups—a “core group” and an “action team.” The core group, consisting of four members, meets weekly to make key decisions on behalf of the larger group. The action team (seven members) meets separately to determine how to implement and execute decisions made by the core group.

The goal of the Young Legends is to support opportunity youth by providing them with information on available community supports and connecting them to jobs. These outreach- and policy-oriented youth advocacy activities are aimed at achieving the ultimate goal of reducing youth unemployment, a focus of the Hartford Working Cities grant.

## Five Key Findings

### 1. Young Legends empowered young adult members to make decisions and lead challenging activities that built their skills.

Youth agency is fostered when older adults collaborate with young people as decision-making partners who can be trusted to make and execute plans. In the case of the Young Legends, the young people were expected to participate in trainings and serve as community leaders who create a bridge to young people in the community. The Young Legends were given autonomy to make key decisions, including the decision to join two previously separate groups under a shared structure, identity, and brand focused on low-income communities of color. The group also became interested in deciding how it could best execute the tasks with which it had been charged. One Young Legend described it this way:

*"I think it was after the third training we were like, 'We're getting all these trainings. We're not [doing] a good job if we're not doing what you guys taught us.' So, we were like, 'How can we put this to use?' ... We wanted to take ownership and, if we're going to be young adults ... we got to take on some responsibilities. That's why I said we even work on our Sundays. We're dedicated and we're ready to make a change, make an impact on our city. It's not their city. It's our city."*

The newly formed group allowed members to exercise greater control over the structure of their organization, take ownership of their activities, and apply what they are learning in their trainings. The Young Legends are responsible for administering their own organization—creating their own organizational structure, scheduling and facilitating meetings, and conducting other administrative duties. They meet independently and are able to develop ideas and discuss them with adults, or to seek support in implementing them. The formation and implementation of Young Legends demonstrates how young people can take advantage of opportunities to lead and make a difference when they are provided agency, training, and support to implement their ideas. One staff member shared the following:

*"I think one of the great successes for them has just been establishing themselves as the Young Legends and really kind of realizing that they had this little spark of something, and they really turned it into something more than what we may have turned it into. And that was pretty entrepreneurial and ambitious of them."*

*"[The Young Legends are] insightful, they're empowered, they understand their communities; they know how to coordinate. They're just a very, very impressive group of young people ... we certainly did not create those people. We helped maybe polish some of the skills that they needed; but these are youth that came to the table with these hearts and these brains and the desire to do these things."*

According to another staff member:

*"[That] is the beauty of seeing that with just providing opportunities, proper training, and exposure, any individual is able to really flourish and kind of break up things that are challenges and come up with some possible solutions. And it's just decision makers, people that needed to say, 'Can we make it happen or not?'"*

Funding partners and program staff from OPP, Capital Working Partners, and Hartford Working Cities—particularly those members responsible for supporting the Young Legends (referred to hereafter as staff)—use various PYD strategies to maximize the Young Legends’ decision-making agency. For example, members of the Young Legends are invited to deliver presentations and to serve as youth representatives for boards and initiatives implemented by regional organizations and agencies. Staff advocate to ensure that Young Legends occupy decision-making positions on the boards on which they sit. As one staff member described, Young Legends are provided with information but allowed to make their own decisions.

*“I think it's super important making sure that they (Young Legends) are a full partner in the decision-making process so that it's not just one sided. I think ... the adults' roles are really to provide information so that the young folks are able to look at what's at the table and are able to make some informed decisions ... The way that I approach The Young Legends is as an advisor. And I am very conscious of making sure that I'm not pushing my agenda onto them, and I'm always checking with them about that. So, I'm always like, 'I want to make sure that this is your idea and not mine.' So, we're always kind of checking in with each other.”*

The Young Legends were also given opportunities to participate in and lead challenging, skill-building activities, with appropriate levels of support and scaffolding from staff. The contract that funded the Young Legends also required other pre-determined activities, including active youth involvement in the Northeast Opportunity Youth Conference and administering a survey to young people. While the Young Legends were expected to play a role in the conference, staff from the Capital Workforce Partners, the United Way, and OPP were surprised by the extent to which the young adults took leadership over the event. Multiple interviewees noted the Young Legends’ role in planning, coordinating, hosting, and facilitating breakout discussions as one of the group’s significant accomplishments. The event, regarded as a success by all participants, highlighted efforts to support opportunity youth in Hartford, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Portland, ME. It had over 200 attendees, including prominent political figures such as Connecticut U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal.

As with the conference, interviewees noted the Young Legends’ leadership in fielding and recruiting young people to take a survey, as well as their role in helping analyze and interpret data. The survey, *Employment Practices That Motivate Young Adults*, was intended to improve employment outcomes for young adults by promoting improved understanding among employers of what was important to young adults in the workplace. Survey results were shared with employers and used to highlight employer policies and practices that would attract and retain young adults in the workplace.

Executing a conference and survey were challenging activities that gave the young leaders opportunities to build their leadership capacity and to learn and practice new skills, such as conference outreach and content development, public speaking, survey outreach, and research.

## 2. Funding partners in Hartford expanded their priorities incrementally to address young people’s ideas and interests.

When youth advisory committees and youth leadership trainings are established and funded, many key areas of focus for training are clearly defined, as are the key issues and activities in which young people are expected to engage. As expected, these activities—and the rationale for why and how young people will be engaged—are aligned with funders’ priorities. As the Young Legends were empowered to lead and make decisions, they were interested in taking on different issues and activities that were not part of existing contracts, and funders were not always able to fund all ideas that young people had. For instance, some Young Legends were interested in organizing a second convening, an activity that could not

immediately be funded. Despite challenges, funding partners, OPP, and the young adults collaboratively navigated these tensions by identifying areas of flexibility and being honest and transparent about what was possible.

The Young Legends were charged with advocating on behalf of young people in Hartford's lower-income communities of color and helping to connect them with economic opportunities in the region. However, there were sometimes conflicts, or a lack of alignment between the activities that young people were charged with through the existing contract and the new ideas they wanted to implement. For instance, the Young Legends were charged with focusing on unemployment, but in both their outreach to other young adults and in their personal experiences, they felt that experiences with homelessness were a key barrier to employment and an issue that deserved a more central focus. While the funding partners and OPP wanted to be supportive of young people's interests and ideas, they were also obligated to follow through with contractual obligations and were limited somewhat by organizational priorities and constraints. One staff member explained:

*"Any one of many funding efforts right now [have] goals for the overall initiative ... If youth leaders bring in a whole set of new emerging issues that don't necessarily fully align with what is already being expected by funders, how do you facilitate through that and support, on one hand, what youth leaders are bringing as new emerging issues, while at the same time, funding efforts [that] are already focused and weighted around certain yearly outcomes?"*

However, funding partners and OPP found a few ways to navigate these tensions and competing interests. First, they identified opportunities to slightly shift or expand their strategy, where possible, to focus more on issues that were of interest to the young people. The funding partners also committed to expanding the list of priorities and activities in the next contract year. Finally, they navigated some of the challenges through clear communication and transparency about the constraints that they faced, so that it was clear to the Young Legends why some of their activities couldn't be implemented.

Interview responses suggest that the Young Legends are inspirational: They bring energy to their work and continually propose ideas for projects, activities, and issues that they want to focus on. However, their ideas do not always align with the contractual obligations between OPP and its funders to achieve predetermined outcomes.

The staff from OPP worked to build trusting relationships with the Young Legends to create the level of comfort and trust that make youth comfortable sharing concerns and suggestions. Staff were also transparent about the systems that affect the Young Legends. For example, adults shared information about sources of funding and how decisions are made behind the scenes at their partner organizations. Staff were also transparent and sought youth's perspectives on negotiations about the upcoming joint scope of work for contracts funded through Hartford Working Cities and Capital Working Partners. Several youth's ideas were included in the scope of work, such as funding to train the Young Legends on navigating professional culture and White spaces.

For example, the Hartford Working Cities grant focuses on unemployment, but youth have expressed interest in prioritizing other issues such as homelessness. While the funders were collaborating to create a combined contract that formally and strategically addresses this area of interest, the Young Legends began to express frustration at the perceived slow pace of change.

Staff responded to these tensions by engaging youth and young adults on the topic of contracts and funding. More specifically, they sought to educate youth on funding sources, contracts, and related obligations or restrictions. In turn, young adults have learned to speak up when they feel that the program is not contributing to the contractual priority of elevating youth voice. As one staff member shared:

*"Having the youth be a part of [the contract negotiation process] keeps us honest because each organization has competing factors and the young people kind of bring it back to what the*

*contract says it is, in the sense of, 'You guys volunteered to have the youth voice. Now, if ... your objectives ... compromise the youth voice or doesn't elevate the youth voice, then you guys are kind of doing a disservice to what the contract is'. So, it's great having them there because they definitely keep us active and on our toes."*

In response, staff have tried to find flexibility within their contracts to accommodate the Young Legends' ideas and goals. For instance, staff have worked to find ways to give the Young Legends more opportunities to focus on the implementation of their ideas.

These joint efforts have led staff to involve youth in conversations with funders, giving them a chance to ask funders how planned goals and activities contribute to youth voice. Through these experiences, youth have learned about funders' motivations and perspectives while also teaching funders how to take a PYD approach. One staff member stated:

*"If we want to really look at it from a system change [perspective] ... I've been doing this for [several] years, and I've never sat at a table with a young adult and my funder and have my young adult say, 'That makes no sense,' and have the funder say, 'You know what. Tell me a little more.' ... It's a learning experience for the older adult in terms of how ... we work with youth. The young people are teaching [the funders] lessons about what it means to really ... take a positive youth development approach."*

Based on this lesson learned, staff have left certain terms in the second year's scope of work more open-ended to provide young people more flexibility to bring new ideas to fruition.

### 3. Program staff, partners, and funders valued and nurtured the young adult leaders by providing employment and other opportunities, and by compensating them for their time and expertise.

Youth advisory councils are often established to reinforce or emphasize the interests of the establishing organizations. While it is commendable that more organizations and agencies seek youth voice to inform strategy, there is a risk involved if young people are used for their expertise and input without their work being valued substantively and monetarily. The Young Legends offer something of immense value to Hartford's youth-serving organizations: They can draw on their lived experience, community insight, and connections to young people, and on their knowledge of city programs and policies. Based on their backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge, youth and young adults can provide city leaders and decision makers with insight that enables them to better design and target city programs and services. According to a staff member:

*"One of the [Young Legends'] notable, significant contributions is their connectedness with other youth leaders that are facing challenges within the system of getting jobs or getting good services or accessing youth services, and there's also their personal experiences around challenges that they've been finding in the overall opportunity system."*

Funding partners and OPP noted the importance of not only recognizing how they benefit from young people's involvement, but also realizing that they are in a position to "pour into" the young leaders' development and not just take or "extract."

*"[Extracting is] give me your feedback, give me your information. And some of your feedback and some of your ideas ... [They] might make it into some of our programs or might not, versus [pouring into them is] let's have it be a two-way relationship where you're providing me with feedback,*

*you're giving me information, and some of your stuff is actually making it into these goals or into the policies, and then we're also developing you. We're connecting you to mentors. We're connecting you to training opportunities. We're going to hire you ..."*

As a result, staff identify the Young Legends' strengths and interests and then link them to connections, resources, and opportunities. For example, youth value and emphasize the importance of being offered employment opportunities that match their interests, rather than simply being employed in the most abundant local industries. Therefore, staff connect youth to mentors with shared identities and who are in industries that youth want to enter.

Valuing young people's expertise can also be reflected by adequately compensating them for their time and input and making it a practice to treat young adult experts—who are sometimes sought for their public speaking or motivational skills—similar to older adult expert informants asked to participate on an advisory board for an organization or a project, or asked to travel for a presentation. Funding partners and staff from OPP discussed working with young people and organizations to help them understand the importance of paying young people for their time, which may be limited, and for their expertise.

This approach is particularly important when considering youth's long-term upward mobility. Providing youth with stable and upwardly mobile positions is an important part of investing in their future. In the case of the Young Legends, this approach began with a self-reflection from a funder:

*"Do we have ways of actually employing these youth? We're training them. We understand that they have a need ... So, to what extent can we, the organizations who are working with them, have spots at our own agencies for these youth? ... We all have to kind of step up a little bit, too, and say, 'We can find a spot for you here.' And I think it's just really ensuring that you're giving back to the youth that are giving to you. And that we are doing everything we can to really lift them and set them up for success. I mean, if that can be within our own agencies ... that's great ... maybe we have a partner that can set them up with something ... we have access to employers all around the region. We have an obligation to make sure that we're setting them up for success. And the program can do so much, but then at some point somebody actually has to say, 'We'll hire you. We'll give you a job.'"*

Staff are working to provide the Young Legends with the skills and connections they need to establish their social enterprise, pursue grants, pursue paid speaking arrangements, and make a living using their experience in the Young Legends. According to one funder:

*"One of the things that I would love for them is to figure out a way to make the Young Legends a social enterprise. We don't, in Hartford, have a youth organization that's doing policy work and organizing ... So, part of what we're doing with Young Legends is how do you take on work and how do you negotiate? Like, 'You should be getting paid for this stuff. You shouldn't just be doing stuff for free.' And so that's something that I envision for the Young Legends, is having them being a legit business so that they can actually do what they're doing and getting paid for it full time. I don't know if that will work, but that's what I'd love to see."*

#### **4. Linking young adult leaders to resources and services helped them balance competing responsibilities and participate more fully in their leadership roles.**

In addition to recognizing the value of young people's expertise, interviewees also shared the importance of prioritizing their time and well-being. As young adults, the Young Legends are in a developmental stage of their lives in which they are experiencing a lot of change and new experiences. In particular, young adults have many competing responsibilities, including work in one or more jobs, participation in education

and training programs, and parenting and other family responsibilities—in addition to personal activities, hobbies, and community service. As the Young Legends became recognized and sought after by organizations and agencies seeking opportunities to elevate youth voice in their work, staff and Young Legend informants noted the risks of becoming overcommitted and burned out. One staff member described this dynamic:

*“They’re so involved in all of the other activities that they have ... A lot of them are in school. A lot of them have full-time or part-time employment. Some of them have children. Some of them are on other organizations that they also do work with. So conflicting schedules sometimes creates miscommunication in terms of when and where they should be and how much they will dedicate to this actual work.”*

For many young people, the Opportunity Youth Conference was their first time professionally organizing an event, planning logistics, and coordinating with other organizations. Although they learn more with each subsequent project, they may not always have a clear sense of the time commitment necessary for the task as agreed. Furthermore, overcommitment leads to stress and burnout. Staff report that youth often feel torn between feelings of overcommitment and not wanting to let themselves or others down, or damage the reputation of Young Legends, by not following through—especially when it involves important people or organizations (e.g., the Mayor’s Office).

*“As young people ... a lot of times have difficulty expressing where they are having or experiencing overload and will say that they will do a certain thing. But when it comes down to it, they just don’t have the time, energy, or sometimes capability of handling certain tasks, so just keeping them accountable in terms of what it is that they say they’re going to do [can be a challenge].”*

As a result, staff feel that it is part of their role to protect the Young Legends from the many requests on their time. Part of their role in developing the Young Legends as leaders has been helping them understand that their time has value and that they can negotiate compensation for services rendered.

*“Now I feel that my work is ... also to protect them because it’s not just [the] funders, but there’s other people within the city that’s like, ‘Oh, there’s this group of young adults that can do this and they’re doing that ... And let’s pull them for this and pull them for that.’ [And these people think that] because they’re young, we’re not going to think that their time has value. Their knowledge, their experience has a monetary value as well as a value itself ... So now [part of my job is] to protect the fact that they get pulled in all these different directions ... [And] to really explain to them, there’s a difference between empowered and validated and ... being used, and not really being compensated for the different tasks and projects that you’re being asked to be a part of. So, teaching them that skill is also a part of leadership development.”*

For example, staff teach youth to gather all information about an opportunity before agreeing to participate, including the projected time commitment, full expectations, and whether there is compensation (and how much). Similarly, when staff interact with outside organizations seeking the time of a Young Legends member, they ask whether the Young Legends will be compensated. Both changes have led more organizations to pay for young people’s time. In this vein, staff also provide youth with a stipend for participating in Young Legends meetings. Youth designated as leaders do additional work, such as scheduling, facilitating, or taking notes, and receive higher stipends than other members (\$60 and \$20 per meeting, respectively).

In addition to teaching youth how to navigate requests for their time, staff also teach them time management skills and how to prioritize and delegate tasks. However, staff noted there are other challenges:

*“The other challenge is really assuring that we’re broadening the base of youth leadership as much as possible, that we are thinking about leadership levels and leadership support that are providing*

*a broad set of access to as many youth leaders as possible. And we can all sometimes run the risk of ... [seeing] a group of youth that are so well-experienced, and then they did such a good job, that we all focus and depend on a small cadre of youth leaders. And then they can get stretched too thin too quickly with many, many demands. And we're not really as attentive to broadening the base of other youth leaders coming into the overall structure we're all trying to support and build."*

Thus, another important approach to consider is to ensure continuous investments in the leadership skills of all young adult participants.

## 5. Young people need staff support and connections to resources to address personal hardships—at times including help meeting basic needs—that hinder their full participation.

Although the Young Legends are in leadership positions and charged with addressing systemic challenges in their communities, many are from low-income backgrounds and have little financial capital to support them in the event of a hardship or personal challenge, such as job loss.

Young Legends and staff discussed the importance of assessing the needs of young people for supports and services and linking them to needed resources. Without these resources, young people may not be able to fully participate as leaders. During interviews with the Young Legends, members cited challenges outside of the group that have interfered with their abilities to fully participate—for example, poverty, unemployment, homelessness, trauma, and other mental health issues. Setting up youth for success includes providing them with services and connections to resources so they can fully participate. As one staff member related:

*"If we don't address some of those other areas that they're dealing with—they may be living in a home that doesn't have electricity on all the time. Or are dealing with homelessness because their parents are constantly kicking them out because they don't get a job because they're trying to pursue school. Or they're trying to go to school, but they need to help their mom out with the rent. So, you have to handle those kinds of youth development issues first to help them be successful in the goals that we have for them."*

Several times, partnering organizations have provided young people with support staff who work to reduce some of these barriers. Staff have helped young people overcome a range of challenges, from offering access to stable housing to providing professional clothing for conferences. Staff have also realized that, to support youth in these ways, they must acknowledge that each young person has a different set of needs and life circumstances and requires an individualized approach. According to one staff member:

*"These are youths that we have a commitment to. And if we are not looking at their life situations—and it actually took one of the Young Legends emailing us saying like, 'Guys, I'm about to lose my apartment. I've got this, this, and this going on.' ... These are still kids that are living this. I mean, these are not kids that were opportunity youth. These are kids that are still struggling, working two and three jobs, some of them are raising kids, some of them are trying to go through school ... it occurred to me that we really have an obligation to them to make sure that we're looking at their barriers and making referrals and helping them gain access to resources as much as we're asking them to do the same for other kids in their communities."*

One member of the Young Legends shared that several youth dropped out of the program because their basic needs were not met:

*“You can't work on an empty stomach ... I know for a fact that some people dropped out because there wasn't enough food. And then, timewise—people aren't meeting at certain times because they live with someone or there was no transportation or different aspects that could have been avoided.”*

Programs and staff should be aware of the entirety of youths' needs even if not explicitly part of the program goal. Staff members did not initially realize that Young Legends members needed such supports since their programmatic focus was on developing youth leaders rather than providing supports for youth. However, by listening and providing space for youth voice, the Young Legends and staff were able to address these issues that directly interfered with the mission. One staff member shared:

*“What makes this program so unique is that it's youth-led. With youth voices. And they're giving us the feedback [in] terms of, ‘Okay, you guys have this contract, and this is what you guys are trying to achieve, but I'm telling you this is how we're specifically not going to be able to achieve it because I have X, Y, Z that I'm dealing with, and you guys aren't doing a good job of helping me address that.”*

As a result of these conversations, staff changed their approach during the second year. These changes included increasing staff time for case management and requiring the use of Capital Workforce Partners' life domain tool, which evaluates life barriers (e.g., housing, food insecurity, support systems) to determine the level of need for each youth. Relatedly, one member of the Young Legends expressed concern about recruiting the next cohort, given that current Young Legends members were struggling with challenging life circumstances. This member also believed that successful recruitment would occur if staff continued to provide increased supports for participants.

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## Conclusion

The Generation Work Hartford team's approach to working with young adults on the Young Legends youth advisory council provides lessons for others seeking to work with individuals or small groups of young people to promote youth agency. Efforts to embed youth voice in decision making have become increasingly popular, particularly in agencies and organizations that work for young people, or that study their outcomes. A number of government and foundation projects even require programs and research projects to demonstrate how they will incorporate youth voice in their work. Growing efforts to integrate a racial equity perspective in youth work have also influenced programmatic efforts to incorporate a range of voices—including those reflective of the young people served—in programs and initiatives. While external forces may have some influence on the increased focus on youth voice in youth workforce development programs and in other settings, most organizations that work on behalf of young people understand the intrinsic value that youth input can have on their work.

The Young Legends became a powerful force in Hartford's youth workforce development sector, with members who were sought as leaders and youth advocates. They were empowered as partners by the Hartford Generation Work team, which employed practices that exemplified the PYD elements noted in this case study and specified in our PILOT tool.

In particular, the funding and training/technical assistance partners in Hartford fostered positive relationships with young adults by actively listening to them and communicating honestly and transparently. Staff showed respect for the ideas and investments made by young adults through the

Young Legends and altered their own way of doing business to provide room for young people to identify new or modified ways of working.

Staff also supported young people's personal growth and skill development, linking them with opportunities that were aligned with their interests or professional goals and giving them the autonomy to lead challenging activities and build their capacity.

Through their close communication with young people, staff realized that many Young Legends had competing demands on their time and were facing personal challenges. Therefore, the funding partners and training and technical assistance staff from OPP helped young people navigate priorities and linked them to resources. When signs of burnout appeared, staff supported leadership distribution so that no single young person was taking on too much.

Ultimately, through an intentional, collaborative, and active partnership between staff and young people, the Young Legends were provided latitude for their ideas and actions, a clear example of an opportunity to contribute.

## Addendum: A Post-Pandemic Update

As mentioned earlier, this qualitative research was conducted just prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, so Child Trends and the Hartford team decided to provide an update on how the work of the Young Legends has progressed.

The Young Legends continue to operate as a smaller group of around eight, with a similar structure and with the support of funding from Hartford Working Cities. They continue to meet as peers through self-check meetings, during which they develop and implement a local agenda and offer support to each other. They serve as local advocates and, considering the COVID-19 pandemic, have focused heavily on issues such as training, unemployment, transportation, and trauma-informed supports. In response to the needs identified by the Young Legends, Working Cities provided some trauma-informed training to local partner agencies. Members of the Young Legends also participate in town hall meetings to assess needs, identify key issues on which to focus, and engage more directly with community members and leaders.

More recent activities include the development of a Young Legends Leaders Academy, and the implementation of a navigation tool. One aim of the Young Legends Leadership Academy is to create a community of young leaders by engaging them in opportunities to connect with mentors from local businesses and organizations who can help coach them, build their social networks, and help them identify job opportunities.

New members of the Young Legends and other young adults with interest in leadership training are granted additional opportunities to receive training, access certification programs, and connect to employment opportunities and career pathways. The Academy, which can serve cohorts of 25 individuals, also focuses on youth empowerment; for example, young people are able to influence decisions about training topics. In addition, four fellows are being recruited and trained to serve as ambassadors supporting participant recruitment and selection, help with content and curriculum development, and assist with leading group activities and discussions. These fellows will also receive stipends for their work and participation.

As might be expected, the Young Legends' needs increased because of the COVID-19 recession and public health crisis, and the initiative has not been able to meet all those needs. To help fill some key service gaps, Hartford Working Cities engaged the Young Legends to help develop and test a navigation tool, which is a searchable web-based database to help people more easily identify community resources, such as training programs and services and employment opportunities. More specifically, the Young Legends helped identify missing resources to include in the tool through outreach to organizations and through

personal knowledge. The Young Legends also recommended search terms, reviewed the navigator to assure its use of accessible language, and were involved in testing the tool to assure its ease of use.

While the work of the Young Legends has changed slightly in response to the pandemic and as a result of new funding priorities, the group largely continues to operate as a fairly independent, young adult-led entity. With the Young Legends Leadership Academy, there is promise for more leaders to be nurtured, so the group can continue to be active in the future.

## Acknowledgements

During our site visit, we spoke with members of the Young Legends and with representatives from the Hartford Generation Work partnership, including those from the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, Capital Workforce Partners, Hartford Working Cities, and Our Piece of the Pie. While their names and titles are not included here, this case study could not have been written without their insights. We thank them for their willingness to share their experiences in effectively partnering with young adult members of an advisory council to address youth unemployment and other local issues. We also thank the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their support of this work as part of the Generation Work initiative and are grateful for their trust in us as researchers.

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<sup>i</sup> Liberman, A., Habteselasse, S., Hanft, S., & Moore, K. (2020). Youth program engagement: What works for recruitment, retention, and engagement? Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

<sup>ii</sup> Bird, K. (2015). Youth governance: Strengthening and maintaining youth committees to improve services for youth. Washington, DC: The Center for Law and Social Policy. Available online at: <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Youth-Governance-OFA.pdf>