

CREATING MEANINGFUL ACCESS FOR UNDERSERVED YOUTH IN RURAL COMMUNITIES



Creating Meaningful Access For Underserved Youth in Rural Communities was developed for rural community or tribal domestic violence and/or sexual assault programs or youth serving organizations that want to design and implement services and programs that are relevant, meaningful, and accessible to *youth ages 13 to 18 of all backgrounds* who have experienced or are at risk of teen dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

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Centering the voices, lived experience, and leadership of young people from historically marginalized communities is among the most meaningful and impactful work we have engaged in to prevent and respond to violence.

Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence

Our Story

In 2006, the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence began to engage youth in the prevention and response to teen dating violence in a rural state. At that time, we were not intentional about centering youth who are historically marginalized and underserved in our recruitment and engagement, and it showed. Our youth advisory councils lacked representation from historically marginalized communities in Idaho, and were comprised of predominately white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual youth. Our strategies – from curricula development to statewide school-based campaigns – featured the voices, images, and experiences of “mainstream” youth, and erased the experiences of youth from historically marginalized communities.

*We learned that unless we **intentionally** focused our efforts on youth from underserved or historically marginalized communities, we **unintentionally** left and even pushed away youth from underserved or historically underserved or marginalized communities.* Underserved or historically marginalized youth include but are not limited to Black youth, Indigenous youth, Latinx youth, other youth of color, youth with disabilities, LGBTQ+ youth, non-binary youth, youth with limited English proficiency, limited-income youth, and youth in the juvenile correction systems.

In 2014, the Idaho Coalition began a transformative journey¹ that inspired a new theory of change that centered our work on historically marginalized or underserved communities that have the least access to resources and opportunities. While we had always valued the voices and lived experiences of young people, we now understood the importance of intentionally centering the voices and lived experiences of historically marginalized or underserved youth.

Since that time, as a result of our continuing transformation, we recruited and hired youth leaders from historically marginalized communities to inspire and inform our youth engagement work. We also convened a Youth Activist Network comprised of thirty-five youth that came together every other week to identify solutions to ending violence. Additionally, our direct services work provides civil legal services to youth who experienced sexually assault, now focuses on youth from underserved communities. Along this journey we have learned and incorporated many practices we want to share with you!

We continue to strive to create the conditions for youth to be their whole selves, to bring their voices, their lived experience, and leadership to our organization. Adults with the Idaho Coalition are continually challenged on how to effectively work with youth from underserved communities in an intergenerational collaboration. We are learning how to balance the honoring of the lived experience and knowledge of both youth and adults. We are also cautious to avoid perpetuating the myth of the exceptional youth who acts entirely on their own without any adult guidance. We make concerted efforts to create physical and sensory accessible spaces, and actively accommodate youth with physical, emotional or developmental disabilities. We are continually learning how to hold the entirety of the experiences that youth have – from challenges connected to multiple intersecting identities, to living in low-income households, to experiencing discrimination in school or their community, to youth who have not come out about their gender or sexual orientation to their families.

Some days, it is just hard and messy, and we rely on our practices of spaciousness, breathing together, and more, to stay calm and grounded. We strive to learn from each other’s unique perspectives and experiences and find a way forward together. And many days, it’s inspiring beyond belief. Over the last five years,



¹ Kelly Miller, the executive director of the Idaho Coalition, participated in the Move to End Violence, which was a catalyst for this change. For more information, see www.movetoendviolence.org.

Idaho Coalition youth activists have been the featured speakers at statewide rallies to crowds of more than 7,000 people, such as the Women’s March, March for Our Lives, Climate Strike, and more. Our youth activists have presented plenaries and workshops at state and national conferences on youth organizing to end violence. In the fall of 2018, through an intergenerational collaborative, we successfully garnered 117,000 signatures on change.org, and reaching millions through national media outlets. We are proud that the Ms. Foundation recently recognized three Idaho Coalition youth activists for our national organizing effort. Most compelling are the innumerable ways that the youth from underserved communities have shaped and influenced all of us in our belief that a world where everyone is valued, everyone is safe, and everyone can thrive is possible.

Why Center Underserved Youth?

Centering solutions on underserved youth is an intentional strategy. Youth who have lived experiences of oppression can best envision the solutions. We use this strategy to ensure that we meet the needs of all youth and all communities. Experience has taught us that when our services and resources meet the needs of historically marginalized youth – *all* communities benefit.

We center youth from underserved communities because they are most impacted by the core problem we are trying to solve. Youth from underserved communities experience dating violence at disproportionately higher rates than their peers. Female African American and Hispanic high school students report experiencing dating violence at rates of 13.1% and 9.2%, respectively, while White females report at rates of 8%.² Nearly half of Native American girls will experience some form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime.³ And one in four girls with disabilities who have dated report experiencing dating violence.⁴ Finally, students who identify as lesbian or gay experience dating violence at rates of 19% to 29%, and bisexual students at rates of 18% to 28%.⁵ Young people are not statistics alone. We need to reject shaming or blaming youth for what has happened to them and implement strength-based approaches that lift young people up. Rural America is diverse, despite the ongoing myth that it is not. Until we see, understand the value of, and embrace the diversity of rural America, we too, will exacerbate the challenges.

Many young people from underserved communities are fully aware of the issues of dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Some through their own experience, and others because of a peer’s experience. Yet there is still a huge gap between youth from underserved communities that experience violence and those that seek assistance.

For domestic and sexual violence programs in rural and frontier regions, serving youth is already a difficult task; issues like transportation, access to services and confidentiality in small-town settings are common challenges. When working with underserved youth who may not be fully accepted in our communities, we need to consider and account for cultural expectations, language barriers, and overall accessibility (spaces, attitudinal, etc.). Centering access, resources, and services on those who are marginalized by society expands our awareness, strengthens our strategies, and ultimately benefits everyone.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 2017.

³ National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (U.S.). (2011). *The national intimate partner and sexual violence survey: 2010 summary report: Executive Summary*.

⁴ Mitra, M., Mouradian, V.E., McKenna, M. (2012). Dating violence and health risks among high school students with disabilities. *Maternal & Child Health Journal*, 17(6), 1088-1094.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2001-2009).

Creating Meaningful Access: Practices to Cultivate and Habits to Interrupt

By embodying new practices – intentional, conscious ways of being – we can interrupt the ways that we create barriers for youth from underserved communities both individually and through our programs, and then consciously develop new, more welcoming conditions. As a society, we have all developed habits – repetitive, unconscious acts or ways of being – that disrupt our own humanity and create real barriers for youth from underserved communities. For us, practice embodies the idea that we are all learning together.

Through cultivating new practices and interrupting habits, we have been able to break down barriers to access for underserved youth, avoid the habit of rescuing or saving youth, and create environments that support all youth to engage and stay connected in our programs, services, and communities of support.

Here are some of the practices we have found to be particularly powerful in our journey.

Practice Wholeness

Youth from historically marginalized communities or underserved youth are whole human beings with strengths and challenges. It is critical to make time for meaningful, authentic connection to know all aspects of them, and build on their strengths.

Create the conditions for youth from underserved communities to thrive. Provide autonomy, empowerment, and acknowledge youth understand themselves best and can communicate to adults about what barriers are impacting their everyday lives. This is important for youth in general, and even more so for young people with disabilities who have had a large number of adults making decisions for them from a young age (i.e. medical providers, therapists, paraprofessionals in a school setting).

Provide nurturing and supportive connections by being a healthy adult role model. Practice and model self-care for yourself first, so you can be an effective mentor for youth. Be conscious that youth are always watching and learning from your own behaviors, including social media usage.

Maintain awareness of the entirety of the lived experiences of youth from underserved communities – their personal and community strengths and assets, as well as challenges at home, school, or in the community. If problematic behavior arises, understand that all behavior is communication of a core need. What is this young person trying to communicate? A need for safety, connection, belonging, support? How can we support them to name the core need and make choices and develop skills that meet the core need? Meet youth where they are with harm reduction and non-judgmental approaches. Provide flexible support where needed – from providing emergency support to a teen mom or transportation to a youth without access to public transportation, to assistance with scholarship applications. Provide healthy snacks whenever possible.

Whether you are providing services to youth or working with youth in program development or implementation, implement peer leadership approaches, and provide choices whenever you can to build agency. Support their growth as leaders by asking big questions of youth: Who are you? What is your purpose?

Toward Wholeness

Step 1 – Interact with all youth as whole human beings.

Step 2 – Provide what you can for youth to thrive – support, snacks, transportation, translate anything for parents in their dominant language, mentor for future jobs, etc.

Step 3 – Engage with youth in conversations on big life questions, see beyond their experience as a survivor or employee.



Practice Cultivating Multi-Cultural, Multi-Racial, Radically Inclusive Environments

Creating physical environments where young people from underserved communities see themselves reflected back is essential. Representation matters because it reflects who we value in our society – from the visual art on the walls to the books on your shelves to the language accessibility of your organizational materials, including representation on website and social media platforms.

Most importantly, staff who are rooted in and connected to underserved communities can be a conduit to meaningful, authentic connections, and can help inform your organizational policies and practices toward meaningful access.

Another element of cultivating radically inclusive environments is to hold broad awareness of the landscape. It is important to be aware of what is happening in your community, or even the country at large, and how this may impact the youth you serve or work with. Are there current events that are targeting or otherwise impacting underserved communities they belong to? This is especially important when conditions are stressful, but it is also true when there is cause for celebration. Create the time and space for youth to share and make sense of their feelings or reflections on these real-life events.

Practice Intergenerational Approaches

Engaging youth is most effective when youth, adults, and elders work together across generations and in appropriate mentorship and partnership roles with each other. Particularly for Indigenous communities, elders are knowledge keepers. Build on ancestral strengths and take actions honoring the impact on future generations.

Be an active adult partner and bring your lived experience, challenge your preconceptions of youth, share your knowledge and learnings to strengthen the collaboration. Sometimes there is a tendency for adults to back way off to avoid adultism – the belief that adults always know what’s best and operate towards the goal of making young people act as an adult would

act – and youth sometimes believe they need “youth only” space to make the work real. Do not be trapped in the binary of us/them, adults/youth. This means providing opportunities for authentic relationship-building between adults and young people, collaborative brainstorming, co-learning, co-creating, and co-facilitating. Successful intergenerational work integrates and fully embraces adults as informed in content areas such as dating violence or campaign strategies and young people as experts in their own lives and making space for them to act on that expertise.

Recruiting and hiring youth from historically marginalized communities as employees to inform the provision of services and/or programming for youth or to experience mentoring opportunities are among the most impactful practices. In the recruitment process, reach out to community influencers and leaders from underserved communities to help recruit youth to be leaders and influencers in your organization.

From advisory councils to staff, there are many models that can be adapted to your organizational structure. This also includes compensating all work regardless of the age of the worker! This support could be monetary such as an hourly wage or a stipend, and can also come in the form of providing transportation to increase access or having food available at meetings and events. Meaningful compensation is an act of honoring and valuing the time and expertise given beyond building their portfolio or network. Carefully consider how your policies and budgets value youth (budgets are moral documents!) while avoiding exploitation of resources and tokenizing. And be aware of the ratio of youth to adults and the inclusion of elders in an organizing group.

Example: Your organization has prioritized work with LGBTQ youth in the local community. An event planning team is created and comprised of staff and other LGBTQ-identified youth and adults in the community. This team is responsible for implementing all local community events. If the event is primarily for adults, the adults in the group are the primary contacts and take the lead with heavy insight and guidance from youth. If the event is primarily for youth, the young people in the group take the lead with support and input from adults.

Another effective way of engaging specific groups of young people is to create the conditions for them to work with people whom they share one or more identities. Those who identify with each other also understand the nuances of the lived experiences. Similarly, our organizations can mentor and build the capacity of young people from underserved communities to offer peer support and peer education, building from the fact that young people will talk to other young people from their specific community about their struggles in our schools and communities.

Interrupt Habit of Adultism: Adultism occurs when adults believe they know what’s best and operate towards the goal of making young people act as an adult would act. If this is how we normally approach working with and for young people, it’s time to adjust! Before we can provide real support for young, underserved people, we need to work on counteracting beliefs associated with adultism. It can be easy, especially if we are not fully conscious of adultism, to fall into the trap of lecturing or unconscious habits of adultism, such as taking up too much space during meetings, sharing ideas before waiting to hear from the youth and then building on their ideas, or coming in with a set agenda and not being flexible to shift based on input from the youth. The behaviors consistent with adultism, like lecturing, can have the opposite impact of what

Toward Inclusive Environments

Step 1 – Assess your organization’s openness, willingness, and readiness to cultivate practices of radical inclusive environments. Has your organization dedicated resources to implement changes needed to be inclusive and accessible as required by law? Who can energize this work?

Step 2 – Learn about creating inclusive organizations from resources like *AWAKE to WOKE to WORK: Building a Race Equity Culture*, Equity in the Center.

Step 3 – Find ways to integrate meaningful representation and accessibility (including technology, website, social media) across your organization and your work. Don’t tokenize marginalized staff – instead, identify what barriers exist within your organization that prevent the hiring and retention of staff from marginalized communities, and work to interrupt those barriers. Which communities are represented in your organizational staff? In your community partnerships? In your outreach materials? Is your environment physically accessible or culturally welcoming?

Step 4 – Practice building a culture of awareness, mutual support and engagement around events that are happening in the world. Make space to help young people process and reflect on both the harm and the healing happening around them.

Toward Intergenerational Approaches

Step 1 – Assess your organizational ability to recruit youth or young adults from underserved communities. Who on your staff would be a good fit for mentoring youth?

Step 2 – Identify the underserved populations in your community. Who are the influencers and leaders from underserved populations in your community that can help guide and support your organization to become more inclusive? Find ways for the relationship to be mutually beneficial rather than transactional.

Step 3 – Recruit youth from underserved communities to be part of your work in whatever capacity possible. Be sure to compensate youth!

Step 4 – Engage in ongoing reflection on how the partnership is going and how to strengthen and enjoy the partnership of working across generations. Don’t forget that adults too need mentoring to be good partners!

we are looking to accomplish. It is already the case that there tends to be a communication divide between young people and adults, and lecturing may serve to even further alienate them and perpetuate the perception that adults just don't get it.

Example of Adultism: In an attempt to increase the number of Black youth who access services, your organization decides to form a speakers' bureau of young people to give presentations about the organization and its services to school classes and other groups of young people in the Black community. Staff wrote the speeches and designed the presentations and then trained the young people on the materials they created. When young people suggested changes to particular aspects of the presentations, the staff members told the young people that they did not have enough experience in this work to know what needed to be said.

Things to avoid:

- Avoid making it our job to tell young people what to do or making all the decisions ourselves.
- Avoid assuming we know better about their experiences than they do.
- Avoid creating materials that are supposed to work for young people, but are not written or designed by young people or accessible for youth with disabilities.
- Avoid inviting youth to be part of something after it has already been organized rather than collaborating from the beginning.
- Avoid approaches that focus on deficits rather than strengths. All too quickly we can over-focus on an outside perspective of what has happened to someone rather than their strength. Don't refer to youth as "at risk" or in "need of saving."

Practice Spaciousness

Spaciousness – creating the time and space for connection, creativity, joy, and reflection – is essential to engaging youth from underserved communities.

Here are some ways to practice spaciousness while providing services for youth from underserved communities or creating programming:

Breathing – Invite youth you provide services to or a youth group you work with to breathe together. For groups, gather in a circle and breath low and s-l-o-w, raising your arms in the inhale, and lowering arms on the exhale. Be mindful: breathe/body work may be uncomfortable for some youth, so create alternatives, such as sitting in a chair or ways for youth to opt out.

Connection – Find ways to meaningfully

connect with youth at the outset of any meeting or gathering. Prompts can be a way to connect, like, "What is the story of your name?" or, "What fruit are you most like today?" Be conscious of what prompt is best for the youth under the circumstances. Acknowledge the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples in

your community. Go beyond a land acknowledgment to actively involve people of the land in all aspects of what you are doing.

Nourishment – Provide nourishing snacks and take time to share food together. Both youth and adults can more deeply connect over what sustains us.

Circle – Gather youth groups in a circle in chairs or on the floor or both! Avoid meeting with youth around desks or a table (unless there is a writing required), that creates barriers between you and them.

Quality art supplies – Provide colored pencils, coloring books, small squares of Bristol board, watercolors and invite youth to engage in art as a way of reflection.

Collectively reading – Read a poem or creating a group poem can be a way to integrate creativity and reflection into any convening.

Closing – Close any youth convening with a way for young people to reflect their internal selves – a simple circle with one word about how they are feeling or what they hope for can bring the time together to a meaningful close.

In developing ways to create meaningful access for underserved young people, it is important that we think intentionally about the rhythm and pacing of the process. When we foster spaciousness, we can expand our vision of what is possible. Our capacity will be stronger and our hearts and minds more open.

Interrupt Habits of Busy-ness or Overextension: Busy-ness and overextension are pervasive habits and can prevent youth – and well, everyone – from living into their full humanity.

Example: Your organization was approached by a representative from a local philanthropic foundation. They saw an article in the paper about an incident of teen dating violence at the high school, and they want to give you funding to start a group for girls in the community who have experienced teen dating violence. They want you to start the program within a month and have offered you a room in their foundation offices to hold the group.

Questions to ask in this scenario to interrupt our habits of busy-ness, adultism, and more:

- What has our organization already committed to for programming?
- Who has been a part of the decision making about this process?
- What kinds of resources are needed at the beginning and to sustain it?
- How do we assess whether the program will encourage meaningful access and which youth will this group be accessible to?
- How are young people most affected included in and leading the development of this project?

Sometimes a good idea may not be a sustainable idea. This may cause more harm than good if our community counts on a particular service that must quickly be changed or removed, inadvertently sending the message that our organization cannot be counted on to consistently support young people. Furthermore, it may stop others from seeking us out for services and supports.

Toward Spaciousness

Step 1 – Integrate mindfulness practices by taking a moment to pause before you jump into action. Practice being fully present.

Step 2 – Intentionally build in time for connection, creativity, joy, and reflection into any time with youth from underserved communities. Provide art supplies or other creative materials

Step 3 – Be conscious about the rhythm and pacing of anytime with youth from underserved communities and be adaptable to whatever is needed in the room.



Practice Experiential Learning

Youth and adults learn more through experiential learning. Most people absorb learning from full experiences, not just being talked at. Young people, especially young people from underserved communities that already receive messages

about their inadequacies, will not appreciate being talked down to. Young people can learn a lot from experienced adult staff at our organizations, and we can also complement these learnings with the knowledge and experience young people can offer each other and to the adult staff. Creating space for young people to gather, build relationships, eat together, and learn together, can allow them to generate ideas beyond what our organizations could imagine alone. At least some of the time, participate in the experience with youth. Not only can we learn together, this can help deepen our relationships across generations.

Practice Community Collaboration

Successful work with and for youth from underserved communities involves collaboration with other agencies, groups, or individual leaders that are rooted in and already work in those communities. Our organization will not always be the primary organization and that's okay. The goal is to create a collaboration that will resonate with the youth we are trying to reach and essentially "strengthen the village" that supports youth in our communities.

Be mindful of the messaging of the collaborating organization.

Example: Is the organization aware of disabilities, and is it physically and attitudinally accessible? If the organization indicates that they are not accustomed to working with youth with disabilities, is the organization willing to learn? Is disability already integrated into the organization in some way? (One example would be if they maintain a resource guide for youth receiving services, do they include disability advocacy organizations among those resources?). Have youth with disabilities engaged with these organizations previously? If so, was the interaction helpful or did it cause more frustrations.

Toward Experiential Learning

Step 1 – Practice deep listening to youth from underserved communities. Be fully present when listening, away from the computer and any devices.

Step 2 – Create opportunities for youth from underserved communities to come together "through doing" with each other. This can include having meaningful conversations, activities, and doing real projects in your community. Build in just enough time to learn by reflecting on your experiences *after* you have had the experience.

Step 3 – Integrate activities that engage our mind/bodies/spirit. **Examples of liberating activities are on www.liberatingstructures.com.**

Toward Community Collaboration

Step 1 – Identify the community influencers or organizations working with underserved communities or youth serving organizations in your geographic area.

Step 2 – Get involved with the influencers or organizations working with underserved communities by participating in and supporting their events.

Step 3 – Build authentic relationships and trust by being honest about what you know and what you need to learn. Offer what you can to the influencer or organization connected to the underserved community – compensation, cross training, access to materials, your gratitude. If done mindfully and intentionally, it can be empowering for youth from underserved communities to educate mainstream organizations. Be aware that it can also be an emotional burden for youth from underserved communities to educate others.

Practice Consistent Support

Our actions have consequences. Consistency helps young people build their own capacity, and it's one of the most important components of any programming or service delivery. Set a precedent for what they can expect from us, each other and the organization. And that's where the magic comes in—young people knowing exactly what the expectations are. Providing those and being consistent gives them opportunities to take ownership for their actions, and build self-awareness and decision-making skills.

It is not often that young people in rural areas, particularly young survivors from an underrepresented group, will reach out and seek supportive networks and services. When they do, it's important for them to have access to our consistent support as they work toward healing and as they develop their voice and leadership.

It's not only important for us to be available at the beginning, but it is important not to disappear. There are a number of reasons we have for not following up with clients or participants including inadequate capacity or resources, but the way we manage our time – and whose needs we continue to meet – is a statement about what and who we prioritize.

Conclusion

Youth have been a part, and are often at the forefront of, every social change effort in our shared history. Nearly all of these movements were inspired and led by youth from historically marginalized communities – or those most impacted by violence or other issues. This momentum continues to this day, and we as adult mentors we have a unique responsibility to invest in the voices of youth and center our own solutions on youth from underserved communities. When youth from underserved communities and adult mentors develop meaningful partnerships, we can co-create dynamic solutions to violence and truly stretch the realm of what is possible. Together we can create the world we want to live into – a world where everyone is valued, everyone is safe, and everyone can thrive. We will co-create this emergent worldview together as we collectively discover and practice new ways of being and bold new solutions to end violence.

For more information, please reach out to the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence at www.engagingvoices.org.

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Toward Consistent Support

Step 1 – Communication is essential. Be clear on what you can do and what you cannot do. Do not promise something that you cannot follow through with. Ease into and provide information on any transitions of staffing or programming.

Step 2 – Provide structure and a routine to programming or service delivery. The more time you put into your structure, the more likely the young people will be successful.

Step 3 – Support yourself as an adult mentor or service provider. Make sure you have your own mentors and guides, for moments of your own difficulty. Model such behavior for youth.

