

Mentoring Programs Engaging Youth in Advocacy

Programs can greatly strengthen their case with elected officials by engaging youth and mentors in their advocacy work as spokespeople. In addition to attending meetings with legislators, there are many other activities related to public policy change that programs can engage both their youth and mentors in. Overall, programs that engage matches in this work emphasize the importance of being strategic around selecting matches, and allowing them to speak authentically about their experiences with the program. Although orientation for mentoring matches is informal, programs note the need to set the context for discussions with legislators, by providing a brief explanation of state government structure and budget process, as well as time for older youth to discuss the role government in community change. The following are examples of how several mentoring programs in Massachusetts include youth and/or mentors in their advocacy work.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Hampden County

BBBS of Hampden County has included matches in meetings that Executive Director, Beth Russell has with the legislators that represent the organization's service area. With the understanding that legislators are most interested in what benefits their districts, she recruits the matches to include in meetings strategically. She first will ask case managers to recommend matches that would speak most effectively and sincerely to the power of mentoring and the positive impact that the relationship has had on the mentee, looking for longer term matches with passionate and upbeat volunteers. Once these matches are identified, the mentors are contacted to assess availability and just as importantly, whether they live in the district that the legislators represent.

In terms of training for matches who provide testimonials at legislative meetings, Ms. Russell makes a point not to have a highly scripted meeting with well rehearsed stories. While she provides the foundation for the conversation with the official, by describing the needs of the young people in her program, the number of matches her organization creates and supports generally, and the number that a particular public program funds, she asks only that matches introduce themselves and then simply speak from the heart and talk about what the relationship means to both of them. Ms. Russell does give the match a warm-up right before the meeting, asking them "What are you planning to say?" She does not correct or make suggestions, but listens and praises the parts she likes best. Youth rarely say the same things in the meeting that they say during the warm up, but may elaborate on the parts she brought to their attention. If the mentor is unable to attend the meeting, she brings another staff person with her, so that the young person is not left alone while she sets the stage with the legislator about the needs and challenges of young people in the program.

Girls Inc. of Holyoke

At Girls Inc. of Holyoke, girls and volunteers, which may include matches, engage in a variety of activities in support of the program's advocacy agenda. Girls tell their stories to legislators in meetings, but also communicate the impact that their involvement with Girls Inc., which often includes a mentoring relationship has had on their lives by writing letters to the Governor and other officials. The organization also utilizes the media as another strategy to advocate for itself, by assisting matches in writing letters to the editor of local newspapers, focusing on the power of mentoring relationships.

When talking about her organization's approach to advocacy, Executive Director Suzanne Parker emphasizes the critical importance of investing time in building relationships with legislators. Girls Inc. of Holyoke invites officials to their events and gives them an opportunity to speak at those engagements as a strategy to educate those officials about its programs and the impact they have on young women and girls. In addition to inviting them to events and for site visits, Ms. Parker also recommends attending local events such as Chamber of Commerce legislative breakfasts where there will be an opportunity to talk to officials about your program. She also suggests a more personal touch, such as writing notes of congratulations to newly elected officials, which simultaneously introduces your program and sends the message that you understand their perspective and support them in their new role.

Partners for Youth with Disabilities

At Partners for Youth with Disabilities, program participants engage in the organization's advocacy work through attending events at the State House such as Massachusetts Disability Month events and MMPs Youth Mentoring Day. According to Executive Director Regina Snowden, youth also have the opportunity to attend the Youth Leadership Forum conference, through which they are instructed in leadership skills training for youth with disabilities. Partners for Youth with Disabilities has also engaged in advocacy around the mentoring line item and has worked towards gaining an earmark in the state budget to support its programs.

Railroad Street Youth Project's Mentoring Program

Railroad Street Youth Project's (RSYP) Mentoring Program matches youth 14-25 with volunteer mentors. Mentees at RSYP are exposed to the concepts of governance and policy making before engaging in any advocacy on behalf of the organization. The organization's Youth Operational Board influences the development of on-going programs. Youth who participate in the governing youth board learn first-hand about consensus- building and policy making. RSYP adult staff recruit mentees to tell their stories at meetings with community members and legislators based on their level of involvement with the different programs the organization offers and most often looks to youth that have been in a program for at least one year. In an effort to prepare youth for these meetings, staff make sure to set the context by explaining the basic structure of state government in Massachusetts and a simplified version of the process by which laws, including the state budget (the largest of the bills debated by the legislature) are made. They have also invited the legislators themselves to lead such a discussion for the youth.

RSYP leaders have developed deep relationships with the legislators who represent the districts of the program's service area. Legislators are invited to see the program in action and meet the youth and their mentors. In one example, the program invited a newly elected state senator to attend and speak at their annual youth conference as its honored young leader of the year. This initial engagement was so positive that the same senator came back later that year to lead a policy discussion on the election process. Executive Director Lannie Moore recommends keeping in regular contact with public officials, and giving youth the chance to interact with them at the program site or in the district office first, as it can be less intimidating than meeting at the State House. There are dozens of public events where legislators make themselves available for their constituencies; these are great to attend with mentees as a warm-up before they attend a formal meeting in Boston.

Raw Art Works

In the past, Raw Art Works has participated in advocacy coordinated by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and has brought current youth participants and alums with them to the State House to meet with legislators. According to Executive Director, Kit Jenkins, when their US Congressional delegation is in the district, their youth may participate in public forums they have at RAW, which often take the form of sit-down discussions of their community concerns. Last spring the participants in their teen mentoring program, Raw Chiefs, called their state senators in support of state gang prevention funding. Ms. Jenkins has also engaged their representatives in the art-making processes, so that they can more fully understand the nature of RAW's work and community-building through the arts.

The organization is currently in process of putting together a program which will create a more formalized "corps" of public presenters that will support their advocacy work. To date, RAW looks for youth speakers who are confident and have a personal and compelling story to share. The new program will not focus on memorizing scripts but on providing basic presentation skills for youth. By creating a more formal system, Ms. Jenkins hopes to further instill the honor and dignity that comes with representing RAW/youth arts, and build the confidence and life skills of their youth to become increasingly more effective at sharing their own stories.