



# Starting a Youth Center

## Youth Center Program Start-up Guide



This guide was made possible with funding in part from:

The Vermont Community Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

# Overview

This guidebook is intended to assist you in planning and starting a youth center. It is important to note that this is not intended to be a complete planning document or step-by-step guide. Whether you are a young person, parent, school board member, teacher, community member, or youth development professional, this is aimed to help anyone and everyone who wants to take leadership in creating a program. Vermont Afterschool and the Vermont Youth Center Alliance are able to give much more specific advice, advocacy, and training around starting up a center in your specific community.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Vermont Youth Center Alliance</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Why Youth Centers Matter</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Community Readiness</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Youth Engagement</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Building a Foundation</b>	<b>8-9</b>
<b>Youth Center Operations</b>	<b>10-12</b>
<b>Youth Leadership</b>	<b>13-14</b>
<b>Assessment and Sustainability</b>	<b>15-16</b>
<b>Recommended Principles and Practices</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Additional Resources</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Final Thoughts</b>	<b>19</b>

# INTRODUCTION

## About this guide

"How and where do I start?" and "Where am I going?" Think of this guidebook as a response to those questions. In this guide, you will find information, ideas, and resources to help you create a new program in your community.

## What is a youth center?

Youth centers take on many forms, but for the purposes of this guide, they are physical program spaces that provide opportunities for young people to make social connections with peers and trained, caring adults, and where youth choose their level of participation in the program offerings (including non-participation).

Youth centers (also called teen centers) have diverse offerings that vary from site to site, but they can include: leisure activities, art, recreation, leadership development, job/life skills training, referrals to other programs, and many others.

Youth centers operate in the out-of-school time hours or what we call the "third space for learning" (which is anytime when youth aren't at home or attending school). Ultimately they offer a space that is safe, and provides access to supportive, adults and enriching experiences where young people can be themselves.

## Who are we?

Vermont Afterschool is a statewide nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that the children and youth of every Vermont community are able to benefit from the power of afterschool, summer learning, and third space programs during the out-of-school time hours. We coordinate the the Vermont Youth Center Alliance (see p. 4), a group comprised of existing and aspiring centers as well as their allies.

To learn more about our work, visit:



# VERMONT YOUTH CENTER ALLIANCE (VYCA)

The Vermont Youth Center Alliance (VYCA) was established in 2018. It built on the momentum and work of a previous group called the Vermont Coalition of Teen Centers that existed in Vermont from 1993 until the early 2010s. Both VYCA and this guidebook draw from and build upon the work the Coalition had done. There continues to be a lot of innovative work happening in the field of youth work, but not a lot of sharing going on. So VYCA was established to serve as a connection point for youth-serving professionals who can often feel isolated in their work and even within their communities.

## VYCA's Vision

The Vermont Youth Center Alliance (VYCA) anticipates a Vermont where all youth have access to safe, inclusive, non-judgemental people and places to go outside of their home or school where their thoughts are valued, their opinions are respected, and they are treated with dignity.

## VYCA's Mission

### To promote the healthy development of Vermont youth by:

#### Organizing

...a network for current and developing youth centers in VT in order to deliver support, establish partnerships, and neutralize isolation of youth center/service workers.

#### Educating

...communities & ourselves about the existence and importance of youth centers across the state in order to build more sustainable youth center programs.

#### Advocating

...as a cohesive group in order to advance the mutual concerns of Vermont youth centers.



VYCA meets monthly via video call to discuss everything from the daily operations and practices that go into running a youth center all the way up to collective actions we can take together to further the field. There is also an active email list through which resources are shared. Contact us to learn more ([info@vermontafterschool.org](mailto:info@vermontafterschool.org) or 802-448-3464).

# WHY YOUTH CENTERS MATTER

Youth centers, like other "third space" programs, provide youth with access to safe, supportive environments where they can connect with peers, gain skills, get support, learn about themselves, and just exist. Spaces that are devoted to young people, especially ones with the flexibility of youth centers, offer the following benefits and positive outcomes outlined here:

## SAFETY

One in 4 kids in Vermont are alone and unsupervised from 3 to 6 p.m. These are the hours when juvenile crime and victimization peak. Youth centers can build protective factors such as connectedness, self-control, self-confidence, adult mentors, and quality peer relationships which can prevent youth from engaging in risky behaviors.



## SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Time spent in afterschool programs, especially the less structured format of a youth center, provides an opportunity for young people to acquire and practice soft skills that will directly benefit them in terms of employability. These skills include: communication, problem-solving, empathy, leadership, and creativity. Youth centers also provide an opportunity to learn more specific life skills in areas such as financial literacy, sexual health, or cooking/nutrition, among others.



## SELF-EXPLORATION

Youth centers' flexibility allows them to be responsive to the interests and needs of the youth they serve. Adolescents go through an intense period of identity development, asking themselves: Who am I? How do I fit in? What is my role? The less-structured approach of youth centers allows young people to "try on" different interests, or even identities in a safe environment and see which ones work for them. Youth centers are uniquely situated in the third space to support that exploration.



## OWNERSHIP AND INVESTMENT

The young people who make up a youth center aren't just "attendees," they're the core of the place. Of the many spaces young people move through, youth centers are often felt to be one of the few places that truly belong to them. This is because youth centers can (and should) be youth-driven. This makes the space function by and for the young people.



## COMMUNITY

Youth centers provide a safe and supportive environment where young people can establish and grow positive bonds with staff and their peers. According to the 2017 Vermont Youth Behavior Risk Survey, 60% of high school students feel like they matter to the people in their community. For young people who participate in afterschool activities, this measure of belonging goes up to 71%.



# COMMUNITY READINESS

In deciding to start a youth center, communities sometimes peg them as a solution without first taking an honest look at the circumstances that exist in a community. While we feel youth centers are a powerful and agile tool, they should not be seen as an intervention that can quickly put a bandaid on larger problems. Nor should they be rushed into without first assessing why the community wants a youth center in the first place. Before proceeding with plans to open a center, communities should:

## ASSESS NEED

➤ One of the first things communities should assess when considering whether or not to develop a youth center is if there is a need for one. Doing a resource assessment with the young people of a community to see what exists for them can be a good way to begin.

➤ To learn more about community needs assessments, check out this toolbox resource from the University of Kansas:  
<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/assessing-community-needs-and-resources>



## ASSESS DESIRE

➤ Once a need has been identified, and it's determined that a youth center is capable of helping to meet that need, you should then determine if there's a desire for a youth center in town. Obviously this should start with the young people of the community. If this is something the adults want, but not the youth, it's doomed from the beginning.

➤ Once you have assessed that this is something that young people want, look to the broader community. This is a time to assess readiness for the center as well and begin to lay the groundwork of identifying and cultivating important allies you'll need later in the process.

➤ For resources on how to best collect feedback from a community, this resource from Public Profit is helpful:  
<https://www.publicprofit.net/Creative-Ways-To-Solicit-Stakeholder-Feedback>

## ASSESS CAPACITY

➤ If the need and desire are there, the project could still be derailed by a lack of capacity. Lacking capacity can come from both short and longer-term deficits in the community and how much you have will determine the scale of the project you can take on.

➤ These deficits can take the form of: a lack of practical skills, an inability to work together effectively, a lack or misuse of necessary resources or ineffective leadership, to name a few.

➤ To learn more about how to assess your community's capacity, head to:  
<https://chwcentral.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Assessing-Community-Capacity-for-Change.pdf>



# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

After assessing readiness, the phase of building begins. At this point young people NEED to be involved. They can and should be involved before this stage, but after you move into the realm of actually putting plans in place, it's imperative they have prominent seats at the table.

## WHY CARE ABOUT YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?<sup>1</sup>

### Participation

When young people have the chance to make decisions that actually matter, they become more invested in the program and want to participate.

### Social-Emotional Development

Young people gain a sense of self-worth and feel needed and useful when they are able to create new or deepen relationships with adults and peers.



### Motivation

Young people (and adults!) are motivated to learn what they want to learn about.

### Self-Advocacy

Opportunities to practice decision-making and leadership can enhance young people's feelings of power, autonomy, and self-esteem.

### Future Possibilities

When young people can explore topics that they are interested in, they have the opportunity to test out ideas and skills that may become future careers.

## SOME "SLIP-UPS" FOR ADULTS TO LOOK OUT FOR:

- Be wary of "adultism" (dismissing the ideas, suggestions, actions, etc. by young people simply because of their age) and be ready to actively relinquish power and control.
- Provide multiple access points for young people to engage in the process. A board or meetings may not fit, so be sure your engagement doesn't have an adult frame.
- Check your biases. What may appear to you as lack of motivation from a young person, may in fact be a lack of skills, comfort, or capacity. Be sure there's equitable access to opportunities and ask young people what they need in order to be able to participate.
- Consider your role. Are you a convener? Organizer? Facilitator? Use your skills and privilege to help set youth leaders and participants up for success.
- Be honest about where young people can make decisions and where they can't. Where they are able to, be sure you outline the parameters clearly.

Precisely how young people are involved will vary depending on the task. To find more resources about to best to involve young people, see the "Additional Resources" section on page 18.

<sup>1</sup>From "Putting Youth in The Driver's Seat"

# BUILDING A FOUNDATION

In order for you to have a solid foundation upon which to build your center, you need a broad base of support. You don't want to do this alone or in a small group. Missing stakeholders can feel resentful and won't have buy-in if they were not included from the beginning (especially youth). Though having more groups involved can make the process more complicated, it ensure all perspectives are heard and sets you up to have a final plan that suits everyone. **DO NOT RUSH THROUGH THIS PROCESS.** It's very important to build a strong foundation by hearing from everyone.

## Locking in Local Support

### Advisory Committee

A youth center's advisory committee decides on common short and long-term goals for the center and a plan of action to reach those goals. This group should be made up of stakeholders of all ages, skills, and backgrounds and work to assess readiness and formulate a plan.

### Community Collaboration

Your advisory committee will be considered your main champions in this process, but you also want to reach out to the next "tier" of supporters. You want community buy-in so a majority of people see it as "our" youth center, not "the" youth center.

### Board of Directors

A board of directors is required if you will be forming as a nonprofit, but even if you're not, it's still a good idea to have a small group with skills, access to resources, and experience that will do the work of putting into place what the advisory committee and community envision.



It may be tempting to jump right into decisions such as who to hire, budgeting, and the nitty-gritty details, but spending time on program vision & mission statements as well as a program philosophy and goals is extremely worthwhile. These documents should act as a guide when you make the smaller choices to ensure you are set you up for success by keeping your broader goals in mind.

# BUILDING A FOUNDATION

Here are some different operational models that may inspire you as you consider how to organize the structure of your center as you start to plan . This is not an exhaustive list and many centers will fit into more than one category.

## Funding/Organizational Models

### Broader Community Center

Sara Holbrook, King Street, XYZ & Morrisville Community Center

Your center would share both space and resources with an organization that serves the broader community (e.g. parents, seniors, children, etc.).

### Stand-Alone Nonprofit

Addison Central Teens, Essex CHIPS, The Hub: Bradford Teen Center

In this model, you are your own nonprofit, covering all aspects of fundraising, staffing, benefits, insurance, etc. and also have a singular focus on the youth center.

### Umbrella of a Larger Nonprofit

The Basement, The Lounge, Boys & Girls Club, Hartford Youth Council

This arrangement can help cover costly overhead and improve your standing as a grantee to funders. The relationship can be as a fiscal agent or be more involved.

### Business Partnership or Stand-Alone Business

Cafe Speranza

Centers can partner with existing businesses or create their own. Youth can get job training experience and it also can provide a source of income for the center.

### Mission Driven or Faith Organization

Spectrum, Outright Vermont

Working with an existing partner that already has a focus on supporting youth can be a way to expand their reach and give you access to their resources and expertise.

### School Project or Partnership

The Space Springfield

While centers should ideally be seen as separate from schools, they can be powerful allies in their creation (through a class) and maintenance (through partnership).

### City/Town Partnership

The Bristol Hub

Working with a municipality can often help get access to free or inexpensive space and also funding and benefits if center staff are classified as city/town employees.

# YOUTH CENTER OPERATIONS

As your planning progresses, your focus should begin to narrow. You and your coalition of partners should begin to focus on more specific topics while keeping your larger mission and goals in mind. Don't forget to build in ways to reassess and reflect. You might need to adapt as you move forward and conditions change.

## Age Range

➤ A lot of changes occur in adolescence. Younger teens and older teens can have very different concerns, interests, language, behaviors, and energy levels. It can be challenging for teen centers to work across these age differences. Ultimately, the question of age range will be answered by your community's need and feedback from youth. Here are some ways in which youth centers can make accommodations:

- Dedicate certain hours or days of the week just for younger "tweens," teens, and older teens in addition to being open to all.
- Have some activities for younger teens and others for older teens.
- Take advantage of teen center "graduates" and develop them into volunteers, employees and/or mentors.



## Staffing

➤ The staff of a program are incredibly important to a center. The relationships they develop are the primary tool that is used to make change in the lives of the young people you serve. Choose them wisely! They should be skilled and knowledgeable in the science and culture of being a young person; able to quickly connect with a variety of personality types; and build trusting relationships with the youth. The exact staff ratio will vary by the size and popularity of your space, but you should always have at least two staff on at a time for safety and liability. You will also need to conduct background checks on any adult entering your space. Lastly, there many different types of staff:

- Paid Staff - Ideally, centers will run with all paid staff. The sometimes challenging work that is done at a youth center requires the skills and expertise of a professional. We want to elevate this field of work and support those who commit to doing it.
- Youth Staff - Having opportunities for people who show deep commitment to the center and/or have "graduated" from programming are a great resource. They may be better able to connect with other youth in the center and built relationships. Again, ideally they will be paid, but their compensation and responsibilities will vary.
- AmeriCorps/VISTAs - Employees serving through these programs can be a great way to get inexpensive help. Just consider that they will only be there for a limited time and may need more help in developing skills.
- Volunteers - Be sure you outline what you need and expect from people who volunteer their time. They should be trained, supported and recognized for their generosity.

# YOUTH CENTER OPERATIONS

## The Physical Space & Location

➤ Location of a center can be a major factor in terms of its use and popularity. While it may not make financial sense to sacrifice a free or inexpensive site in order to get an ideally suited one, you should consider the following when searching for a location:

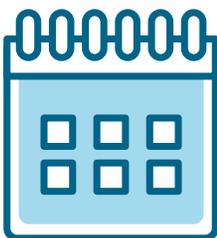
- Proximity to schools, downtown areas, and transportation so there's easy access.
- Having some outdoor space, ideally with fields or other desirable activity spaces.
- Visibility in the community. You want to find a balance so the space feels private for participants, but public enough so the larger community knows of its existence.

➤ Interior space matters. It can take many forms, but you want it to be comfortable with the ability to adapt for different uses (from concerts to art). You also want to consider supervision in the space. Having many smaller spaces can make it harder to ensure safety. It's best to have a large space you need to divide vs. a collection of small spaces you need to open up. Most importantly, don't over-plan the space. Painting the walls and deciding how to arrange furniture is one of the easiest ways to help young people to take ownership of a youth center.

## Program Offerings & Services

➤ Unstructured, drop-in time should be at the heart of a youth center, but programming is also an important aspect of any center. Much like the interior space of the center, programming should be youth-driven and serve their needs and wants. See the "Youth Leadership" and the "Additional Resources" sections for ideas on how to partner with youth to develop programming. Here are some common programs that centers offer:

- **Tabletop games club (D&D etc.)**
- **Groups for certain identities (LGBTQ+, race, ability, etc.)**
- **Groups to further causes (Black Lives Matter, Environmentalism, Gun Control, etc.)**
- **Arts and creative writing**
- **Music production and performance, including concerts**
- **Sexual health, financial literacy, and other life skills classes**
- **STEM programs (experiments, coding, maker movement, etc.)**
- **Field trips to local events, entertainment and attractions**
- **Support/discussion groups**
- **Referrals to and partnerships with other service providers**



# YOUTH CENTER OPERATIONS

## Safety, Expectations, and Norms

➤ Youth centers must develop guidelines of acceptable behavior, language, and activities to foster a safe space for staff and youth, both emotionally and physically. The center must also be a place where teens can feel comfortable, have an empowered voice, and take ownership. For this reason it is essential that the young people be one ones to control this process. The guidelines should create a setting where all feel welcome and have their thoughts valued, their opinions respected, and be treated with dignity. It's best if expectations are framed positively: "Do this" or "Please that" instead of "Don't this" or "No that." Keep the language simple and direct. Don't get bogged down in specifics and aim for broader principles that apply to a large swath of situations. Make sure you discuss and include what happens when someone is not following the community's expectations, how the community will respond, and steps for how to make repairs. This should be a living document that is revised and reassessed on a regular basis. Beyond written expectations, there are norms that form a culture of a space as well. Be sure you discuss these "unwritten rules" as well.

Below you'll find some questions that should help guide your community as you figure out how to build and maintain a community that works for all.

### QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE TOGETHER:

- **What do you want the space to look like?**  
**Sound like? Feel like?**  
Create a shared vision.
- **What does safe mean?**  
Explore what being safe means; physically, emotionally, etc.
- **How do you resolve conflict?**  
Conflicts are sure to arise, how will you handle them?
- **What does substance-free, hate-free, violence-free, etc. mean?**  
Who defines what those are?
- **What happens when someone doesn't meet expectations?**  
Is it staff-led, youth-led, or something else?  
What are the "consequences"?
- **How are the expectations agreed upon?**  
Is it up to consensus? How will they be altered if need be?



A simple framework used by the Neutral Zone of Ann Arbor, MI

# YOUTH LEADERSHIP

## General Considerations

➤ The youth who attend a center are its core community. As such, they must be a large part of the leadership of all aspects of the center. This leadership can vary in terms of the commitment required and the scope. Not all youth will want to opt into leadership roles, but every youth should be given the opportunity and skills to do so when and if they choose. The three main areas that youth should be have a say are: programming, operations, and organizational structure. Each of these are covered below, but here are some general ideas to consider.

Be sure you're giving enough structure to what's being asked of youth. While it might feel restrictive to put parameters on what you're asking, you want to find the happy medium that's just right between having too much structure ("Choice A or B?") and not enough structure ("What should we do?"). You want to be sure they have the skills do what's being asked and that what's being asked is enough of a draw to pull them in.



Not enough freedom  
(Lack of interest)

Meaningful  
choices within  
supportive structure

Too much freedom  
(Frustration)

Image Courtesy of the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality

## 1. Shaping Programming

➤ Ideas for programming can come about in many different ways: from informal conversations to surveys. There isn't necessarily one correct way in which to have the the young people of a center decide what should be offered, but there should be a clear and easy way to do so, ideally with multiple ways. It's also important that young people not only generate programming ideas but also are part of the implementation and follow-through of actually pulling it off. This will help them learn the valuable skills needed to plan and organize programming and also instill more investment in it, which should lead to more quality and better attended programming.

June						
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	
				Pride Month Window Display! 3pm		
	4-5pm Meal Night 5-7pm Movie Night Gender Revolution	6-7pm Safer Sex Work with St. James 3pm	8-9pm Zine Workshop 3pm	10-11pm Therapy Room Art with Micah Drop In Opens at 2:30!		
	11-12pm Meal Night 5-7pm Intergenerational Meal Night	13-14pm Meditation & Stretch Class 3pm	15-16pm LGBTQ Community: Japan Talk Hosted by Asako! 3:30pm	17-18pm Pride Parade Sign Making 3pm		
	19-20pm Meal Night 5-7pm Drag Summit Kick Off Party	21-22pm Drag Summit ALL DAY Drop In Closed	23-24pm Drag Summit ALL DAY Drop In Closed	25-26pm TRANS MARCH Drop In Closed	27-28pm DYKE MARCH Drop In Closed	
CENTER CLOSED	29-30pm Meal Night 5-7pm "The Boi Doc" Discussion with film maker	31-1pm YLC's Creating Change Workshop 4pm	2-3pm Beginners Yoga Class 3pm	4-5pm Ice Cream Sundaes 4pm	6-7pm NO HO	

**YOUTH PROGRAM**

Drop-In Hours

Tues.-2-7pm  
Mon/Weds/Thurs 1:30-6:30pm  
Fri.-1-6pm  
Sat. 10a-3pm

Drop In will be CLOSED 6/22 and 6/28 for Pride events. Find us at Trans March and Pride Parade!

# YOUTH LEADERSHIP

## 2. Shaping Operations

➤ Another way young people can get involved in shaping their youth center is deciding how the center should run. Shaping operations might not be as motivating for some youth, but it can prove to be very important. Decisions around open hours, physical layout, center expectations and norms, and similar operational decisions do a lot to shape what a youth center is. These decisions could be made on a more informal case-by-case basis, but it's best if they're made by a group who commits to making them over a period of time. It could look like a temporary committee that runs like a club that takes on a set docket of issues on a shorter-term basis. Or it could look like a standing council that takes on issues as they arise and people commit for a longer period. If it is possible to do so, compensate the youth for their time and work. While they are gaining skills and experience from what they're doing, they are making a commitment to improving their center and providing a very valuable service to it.



## 3. Shaping The Organization

➤ Young people who attend the center can also get involved on a larger scale and shape the organization as a whole. The purview of a standing council can be expanded, youth could be added to the center's board (ideally 1/4 to 1/2 of the seats) or a separate youth board could be established. The exact structure and powers of this board will vary by organization, but here are some things they could potentially oversee or influence:

- New staff and board member interviews
- Budget oversight and spending decisions
- Long-term planning and visioning
- Community connections and collaborations
- Expansion of services or other organizational undertakings
- Fundraising and grant writing
- Shaping of policies and by-laws of the organization



**Remember that youth leadership begins with the culture that is created by the everyone in the center. The relationships that shape a space's culture are formed through every single interaction you and others have.**

# ASSESSMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Getting a new youth center off the ground is a huge and exciting undertaking, but sustaining it can be a daunting task. But this doesn't have to be the case! By documenting and quantifying the positive change that is happening with the center, you can help show parents, teachers, town officials, funders, and other stakeholders that the center is a vital to the success of the young people AND the broader community. You can tell the story of the services the youth center provides and how they are essential for a community's health and resilience and should be supported in the same way as other essential services.

## Measuring What You Do

➤ For most youth centers, the measures they collect are driven by grants and the reporting requirements that come along with them. Most, if not all, youth centers in Vermont rely on grants in some capacity and the data they must provide typically falls into two categories: measuring how many people came through the doors (number of youth served or visits) and some measure of the volume and variety of programming offered. These numbers do an okay job showing some of what centers do, and there is nothing inherently bad with them. They're just incomplete. They don't capture the impact a center has on the people it serves or the broader community. Testimonials and storytelling can fill in the gaps, but that still doesn't show broader or long-term change.

➤ Capturing what the center does on an individual basis can help paint a more nuanced picture. The Youth Thrive Survey is such a tool, one that VYCA is currently looking towards helping centers implement across the state. It not only allows you to see the outcomes of traditionally tough-to-measure things like relationships and personal growth, but it also allows you to see both how individuals are doing over time and how the center is doing on average. The Youth Thrive Survey is a strengths-based survey in which young people use a Likert scale to assess themselves in the areas of:

- Youth Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Adolescent Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence



**Youth  
Thrive**  
An initiative  
of CSSP

➤ The Youth Thrive Survey is just one way to capture a more complete picture of what happens behind the doors of a youth center. It's certainly not the only way to do so, but capturing the real change that is coming about as a result of the relationships that are forged through youth centers gives your arguments more weight. Plus, more complete measures are one of the best ways to not only professionalize the field of youth work but also to show those who may be skeptical that real, meaningful change is happening as a result of the center.

# ASSESSMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

## Keeping it All Going

### OUTREACH & COMMUNICATIONS

➤ After you have collected and synthesized data and stories about your center, you need to get the word out. If no one knows the great work you do, no one will see you as valuable. One of the biggest parts of sustaining programming is telling the story of what it is and why its valuable. If enough people see it as necessary for a community, it will continue. Even when times get tough, communities find ways to fund and support things they see as essential. The key is regular, clear, and consistent communication. This could happen via social media, emails, blog posts, or mailings, just to name a few. You want to make the information easily digestible and highlight positive aspects of the work you do. Doing press releases to get local media coverage can also be a useful way to get your work out into the public eye.



### MORE PARTNERSHIPS

➤ Another way to ensure continuing success is to continue developing strong community partnerships. Hopefully through your robust communications, you'll attract and engage new people and groups who you either missed in your initial outreach or who waited to engage until the center was more established. Not only is it fine that they waited (be happy they're there!) their presence adds to the diversity of partnerships you have. It's also important to keep those partnerships fresh and vibrant by ensuring those with an interest in your success have a genuine voice. You want to partner with them and ensure their skills and expertise are utilized.



### FLEXIBILITY & ADAPTABILITY

➤ Which brings us to the last consideration of sustainability and that is flexibility and adaptability to changing conditions. It's important to have a critical eye when it comes to self-assessment and if the center is providing the services and resources needed by the young people of your community. Momentum can be difficult to swing, especially if something had been working for a while. There may be forces that resist change, but with data, communications, and a strong network of partners, you should be able to adapt what and how you need to continue providing for your youth.



# RECOMMENDED PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES

1

Structure - The organizational and physical structure of a youth center should be both grounded AND nimble enough to meet the diverse needs needs of the young people it serves, while also providing a consistent base of support for them through changing times.

2

Programming - The programs at a youth center should be driven by the youth who attend and serve their needs and interests. They should be engaging and allow for multiple entry points and levels of engagement. That also includes non-engagement. Just the act of being in a youth center is an intervention itself.

3

Youth Voice - The young people of a youth center should have control, or at least influence over as many aspects of its operation as is feasible. The norm should be to include young people unless there's a compelling reason not to, not the other way around.

4

Relationships - The relationship is the primary tool that is used in youth work. High-quality relationships are essential to young people's growth, learning, and thriving. It's essential that the adults around them have skills in creating, maintaining, and leveraging relationships with every young person in a center.

5

Safety - Attendees, staff, community members, and others should feel safe in a youth center. This means feeling physically and emotionally safe to be themselves and feel supported, not just free from attack. The center community should define, enforce, and continually reassess what safety means to them.

6

Equity - The people within the youth center, especially those in power and from groups that have historically held power, should take actions to educate themselves about past and current injustices and do all they can to use their current power and privilege to right those wrongs and empower others.

7

Community Connections - The youth center should be a community in and of itself, but the greater community should have a role in the space as well. Through volunteering, referrals, and shared events and activities, you want to build a group of outside allies that support "their youth center."

8

Identities and Skills - Youth centers are aligned in the "third space" (the places outside of home and school) to provide a comfortable venue in which young people can "try-on" new identities and skills. Adolescence is a time of intensive self-discovery and centers should actively support that process.

9

Humility and Transparency - Exploring power dynamics outside staff and youth's control can be enlightening. It pulls back the curtain around how staff and youth engage, allowing everyone to have a fuller understanding of one another and come to the relationship more informed and empathetic.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Vermont Youth Center Alliance: [www.vermontafterschool.org/vyca](http://www.vermontafterschool.org/vyca)
- Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas "Community Toolbox": <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents>
- Asset Based Community Development: <https://www.nurtureddevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development/>
- Youth Thrive Survey from the Center for the Study of Social Policy: <https://cssp.org/our-work/project/youth-thrive/#survey-instrument>
- Program start-up, philosophy, funding and other resources from the federal government: [youth.gov/](http://youth.gov/)
- "Youth Collaboration Toolkit" True Colors Fund: <https://truecolorsunited.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/08/Youth-Collaboration-Toolkit.pdf>
- "Youth-Adult Partnership Rubric" Neutral Zone & Michigan State University: [https://cerc.msu.edu/upload/documents/Youth-Adult%20Partnership\\_v1.0.pdf](https://cerc.msu.edu/upload/documents/Youth-Adult%20Partnership_v1.0.pdf)
- Grants and other financial resources. Vermont Community Foundation: <https://www.vermontcf.org/NonprofitsGrants/AvailableGrants.aspx>
- "Washington State Youth Voice Handbook" By Adam Fletcher: [https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Resources-Youth-youth\\_voice\\_handbook.pdf](https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Resources-Youth-youth_voice_handbook.pdf)
- Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework: <https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/>
- "Putting Youth in the Driver's Seat" Development Without Limits: <https://www.developmentwithoutlimits.org/sample-work/2019/2/4/putting-youth-in-the-drivers-seat>
- "Beyond the Bell: A Toolkit for Creating Effective After-School Programs": <http://www.beyondthebell.org/products/>
- "Game Changers - Establishing a Youth Advisory Council": [https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/resources/game\\_changers\\_yac\\_toolkit.pdf](https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/resources/game_changers_yac_toolkit.pdf)
- "Freechild Institute"- Resources on youth voice, youth engagement, youth empowerment, youth leadership, youth/adult partnerships and other topics: <https://freechild.org/>
- "Nonprofit 101" - This resource comes from Common Good Vermont and covers a lot about nonprofits in VT, from start-up to management: [commongoodvt.org/nonprofit-101/](http://commongoodvt.org/nonprofit-101/)

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Starting a new youth center can be an exciting, but also daunting, task. Don't forget to take it one step at a time and to lean on your community, partners and champions in the process. That includes Vermont Afterschool and the Vermont Youth Center Alliance. We wish you the best in your endeavor to start up a new program in your area and are available to answer any questions and provide support along the way. We have the skills, expertise, and knowledge to help guide you and are happy to provide advice, trainings, or just a listening ear at any point along your journey. Providing quality afterschool and third space opportunities for youth is important to all of us--young people, families, and communities. We are here for you! Please contact us at Vermont Afterschool and VYCA for more information.



[www.vermontafterschool.org](http://www.vermontafterschool.org)  
150 Kennedy Drive, South Burlington, VT 05403  
802-448-3464  
[info@vermontafterschool.org](mailto:info@vermontafterschool.org)