

## Guiding Charter

When it comes to youth participation there is no 'one size fits all'. However, there are common aspects that can contribute to ensuring a successful youth participation strategy within youth mental health services. This charter highlights what is good practice and should guide the development of models or mechanisms for youth participation.

The term 'Guiding Charter' is used by many youth organisations in Australia to highlight their 'bottom lines' regarding good practice when working with young people in the field of youth participation. Having a formal document communicating how organisations work with young people helps ensure transparency with the wider community and provides an accountability mechanism that can be used to evaluate practice when implementing models. It is hoped that young people, workers and organisations in the community will adopt the beliefs and principles within the following Guiding Charter.

### Guiding Charter

We believe young people have the right to participate in the development, implementation and evaluation of programs which affect their well being. We recognise the need for this process to be facilitated in a respectful manner using a developmental framework, which embraces diversity. One size does not fit all!

1. Youth participation strategies will have clear and transparent aims and processes ensuring valid consent to participate is provided. This will also result in an increased awareness of the benefits in participating.
2. At the beginning of the project, workers and young people will agree on the boundaries of confidentiality ensuring that the privacy of young people is protected.
3. A diverse group of young people will be represented. Attention will be given to sampling relevant groups of young people and appropriate sub-groupings to enable all participants to be active in their groups.
4. We will recognise and consider young people's:
  - a) developmental level
  - b) social-emotional wellbeing
  - c) potential for participation, and
  - d) cultural sensitivities.

Tasks young people are expected to undertake will be matched with these factors.



5. Activities for young people will be fun and engaging. Group sessions, break-in activities, short sessions, sports, music and games will be used to make projects more enjoyable. If young people are not enjoying themselves, are getting bored, or dropping out, methods will be reviewed and adapted to the young people's interests.
6. A structured framework will be adopted where:
  - a) roles are defined
  - b) available supports and resources are identified
  - c) project goals and outcomes are specified
  - d) skills and experiences of all involved (young people and adults) are recognised.
7. Skills development activities will be specifically designed and implemented to suit the needs of youth and adult service providers.
8. Accountability mechanisms will be incorporated throughout the participation process. These will be negotiated with the young people directly involved in the project and will provide them with an awareness of the end product and formally acknowledge their involvement so they feel appreciated.

#### Keep it simple:

There are five basic steps that can be taken by organisations to initiate and sustain successful youth participation:

1. Analyse current organisational position and willingness to incorporate youth participation:
  - Has the organisation provided resources to support youth participation?
  - Is there a desire within the organisation to be accountable to youth?
  - Are there formal strategies and policies in place to ensure young people are involved appropriately in decision making?
  - Where do young people fit in the organisational hierarchy?
2. Create a youth-friendly environment
  - Are flexible times, transportation, financial remuneration available?
  - Are meetings short and focussed on producing outcomes?
  - Are there opportunities for young people to voice their opinions?
  - Does the organisation respect young people?

3. Ensure young people are 'on board'
  - Are young people appropriately integrated into decision making processes?
  - Does internal communication include young people?
4. Keep young people interested
  - Is the organisation implementing (where appropriate) decisions made by young people?
  - What incentives are available to keep young people involved?
  - Can young people initiate, manage and lead their own projects?
  - Would peer support be helpful and is it available?
5. Evaluate with young people
  - Are mechanisms available to collect and share lessons learned from successes and challenges?
  - Are evaluation outcomes used to inform future youth participation strategies and activities?
  - Does the organisation allow for continual feedback from young people involved in the youth participation initiative?

"I believe that a dedicated youth participation coordinator and regular communications within the youth participation team are critical to the success of any youth participation program. A dedicated youth participation coordinator is required to facilitate communication between group members, develop various youth participation opportunities for group members, and to maintain team motivation. Regular communications within the youth participation team should include formal face-to-face and/or telephone meetings, as well as informal discussions between group members. Without these key ingredients, youth participation can become tokenistic and ineffectual".

Katelyn, 25 VIC

"The funny thing is that youth participation, though over generalised and over used, is a very simple term. It means that young people need to participate in decision making and is a means of skill building and assisting young people to find their own path in the world – and that, when all is said and done, is the most important thing. Participation is a two way process".

Nathan, 23 NT