

Children- and Youth-Focused City Departments and Offices:

Recommendations for Maximizing Impact



In the work to secure dedicated funding for children and youth, city-level youth-focused departments and offices (D/Os) can play a significant role. They can be an important agent that moves a youth-centric agenda forward across all functions of city government. These D/Os are different from a city's parks and recreation department which provides direct services for children, youth, and their families. Rather, a D/O is a unit within city government that works on the broad functions of planning, coordination, civic engagement, policy development, grantmaking, and strengthening the city's infrastructure to support children and youth.

Recently, FNG interviewed the directors of six city-level D/Os across the state. The following recommendations are based on the learnings from these conversations.

1. Don't let the lack of a dedicated children's fund deter the creation of the D/O.

Most cities in California that have a D/O do not have a dedicated children's fund. While some city resources need to be earmarked for the operations of the D/O, these cities recognize the important role that a D/O can play in supporting their kids. These D/Os are more deeply involved in policymaking and engaging young people in their work rather than grantmaking as is the case in cities that do have a dedicated children's fund. Shifting the culture within city government about where children and youth lie in the city's list of priorities is part of the "pre-work" needed to create a path towards a future dedicated fund.

2. Get everyone "on the same page."

One of the first steps a D/O can take is take the lead on creating a "guiding document" such as a strategic plan. Most of the cities interviewed have a document that resembles a strategic plan albeit not all used that label. This document is and should be what guides the work of every department across the city regardless of whether the department has an explicit "youth program." The plan can also serve as a tool to advocate for funding that will support implementation. Because these documents must involve youth and community voice in their creation, the D/O will develop allies who can fight for funding from the "outside." Realistically, at some point, the whims of a city council or mayor can supersede the plan and/or changing dynamics in the city will impact implementation. Yet, as long as the document is in place, the D/O has a tool to refocus the city back on its implementation.

3. Elevate youth voice in city government at every turn.

A D/O is in the unique position of promoting the role that youth voice can play in policy- and decision-making within city government. A youth-focused D/O cannot (and should not) exist without youth at the table. The most "obvious" vehicle is through a city youth commission. Youth can also be involved in the development of a strategic plan and/or in conducting research for a community needs assessment. Other examples gleaned from the interviews include engaging young people in an annual participatory budgeting process to determine

how to allocate a defined amount of funds. If the D/O has a youth advisory council, these young people can help other city departments create their own councils. Finally, a future ballot measure to create dedicated funding for youth services can require that a certain percentage of the oversight body be under the age of 24.

4. Coordinate across city departments.

A D/O can work with other city departments to engage as many city-level systems in supporting kids. When other departments are conducting community outreach or holding focus groups, a D/O can remind/encourage them to make targeted efforts to include young people and help with recruitment of youth if needed. A D/O can also identify ways in which departments can become more youth-friendly or at least consider how their decisions may impact kids. In one locality, the D/O coordinates a program for city staff to mentor students in the local school district. In another example, city staff in various departments host youth as interns for a youth workforce development program managed by the D/O.

5. Engage elected officials every chance possible.

The need to cultivate a “champion” on city council is critical. A standard way to begin this work is to meet regularly with individual city councilmembers and/or make presentations to city council and any of the council’s standing committees about the D/O’s work and the needs of the city’s youth.

6. Access resources not available to non-profit community-based organizations.

A D/O has access to county, state, and federal funding that are available only to government

entities. If there is capacity, securing grants from other governmental systems will garner positive attention and have an impact on the city’s ability to support its kids.

7. Convene stakeholders and drive change.

As a citywide agency, the D/O can bring together both city staff and the non-profit services providers to identify and tackle challenges facing young people. The city nor community-based organizations can tackle the issues alone. In one city, the D/O has a formal service provider group that gives authentic feedback to the D/O on how to strengthen its work and how to better support community-based organizations.

8. Strengthen the overall children and youth services ecosystem.

A D/O can play a significant role in strengthening the network of non-profit service providers particularly in communities that are the hardest to reach. Because community-based organizations tend to have stronger relationships with community members, including youth, ensuring that these providers remain healthy is critical. One city interviewed provides capacity-building grants along with technical assistance. Another city is working to simplify the process of Department of Justice fingerprinting for non-profit employees. This same city has created an online “secondary data analysis” that provides data about children and youth at the city, county, and state levels for community-based organizations that need this data to write grants.

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