

## conclusion

**T**his guide to policy change provides groups and organizations of youth and young adults challenged by mental health conditions with basic information about changing policies that are important to their success and well-being. We prepared this manual leaning heavily on the wisdom of young adult participants in the “Stepping Up” study and their adult allies. They identified several “ingredients for success” as fundamental to successful policy change and also made direct recommendations to other young adult-led groups about the challenges and successes they encountered in their policy work. Because many of the ingredients for success and recommendations overlap, we have combined and summarized some of the main points here.

### Youth voice

Participants in the “Stepping Up” study were unanimous in their conviction that youth input and involvement is central to successful policy change. In addition to emphasizing the weight and authenticity contributed by youth experiences and insights about system and policy issues, nearly all of the groups in the study had developed ways to get input from a wide network of youth and young adults in their states and communities. Several groups held state-wide conferences or other gatherings where policy concerns were gathered, summarized and shaped into a policy agenda. Other groups of young people were organized geographically, by county or section of a state. These groups of youth and/or

young adults met regularly, and then sent summaries of the issues or problems they discussed to a central location such as a statewide youth organization or a less formal group of youth and young adults.



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“Trust that stories are really crucial to any piece of legislation that you are passing, whether it is higher education, health education, financial literacy ... and the stories and the hardships and adversities of the youth.”

### Partnerships

Although this policy guide is addressed to youth and young-adult groups and organizations, it is important to note that no youth-led group in the “Stepping Up” study was completely responsible for all aspects of the successful policy change effort. In some cases, young people initiated a policy effort by identifying an issue and then finding supportive partners. In other cases, a youth-led group was invited to help with an ongoing change project by providing testimony, attending legislative hearings, or speaking to community groups. Regardless of the place in the policy cycle where partnerships were formed, representatives of youth-led organizations emphasized the importance of partnerships in promoting and achieving policy

change. Here we use the term “partners” to include a number of different people and organizations:

- Important decision-makers, or *champions such as legislators*;
- Supportive administrators and service providers working in mental health or other systems;
- Organizations that support youth- and young adult-led groups by handling funds, and providing administrative structure and support;
- Other community groups who are allies.

These partners played a variety of roles, including preparing draft language for legislative bills, identifying legislators who were in agreement with the change agenda, providing information and support to the youth group, and giving testimony in support of the proposed change.



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“Youth-adult partnerships — that is what made us a success. The adults really need to embrace the value added of young people and what they can contribute, whether they have a formal education or not, but really understand their actual lived experience and how that can help you create better services and better quality programs.”



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“...We always, always, always prep them before meetings ... Sometimes that will look like us gathering a group of them ... and talking about what they can expect and maybe talking points of what things they think need to be changed.”

### Don't give up

Policy change can be a long, sometimes discouraging process. Several of the youth groups in the “Stepping Up” study said that their change effort did not succeed on the first attempt. They also described their strategies to develop relationships with decision-makers who had not supported their efforts the first time, and



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“...Something we have learned over the years is that there are some tough subjects. ...We didn't say [fix everything at once]. That is why it took us several years to get that bill passed. It didn't happen in one legislative session.”



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“We have had legislators fall asleep on our youth, or legislators who say, I don't want to hear your story and then start talking about other stuff. ...We were prepared for those kinds of situations.”

### Prepare for the work

This recommendation includes providing information about the legislative process and helping peers understand and practice strategic sharing as they prepare to tell their stories. Study participants also underlined the importance of anticipating and preparing for resistance to their ideas and goals.

the eventual payoffs. Study participants also provided examples of how resistance to policy change efforts can be addressed by focusing on one issue at a time.

Youth-led organizations are challenged by a changing membership as experienced members move out of the group to take on other adult roles and responsibilities. As new members come in there is a continuing need to provide information, training, and support to members engaged in policy work.

For youth and young adult-led organizations who want to begin policy change efforts as well as those with more experience, the information provided in this guide will serve as a foundation for getting started. The guide also contains many references to written material and links to information on the internet that give more detailed information than we are able to include here. Links to many resources are included in the pages of this Guide and in the Endnotes. In Appendix B the References are presented in



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“There was one ... lawmaker [who] wouldn't let the bill out of committee. ...We couldn't figure out why for a long time. ...Finally I got a meeting with him...we had a heart-to-heart talk and after that he passed the bill out of committee. He is on our side now, willing to support our issues.”

alphabetical order. Contact information for “Stepping Up” study participants who have agreed to share their knowledge and wisdom about policy change is located in Appendix C.