

# How To Organize a Youth Forum

by Jutta Dotterweich, ACT for Youth

This document describes how to organize a youth forum of the type that the Upstate Center of Excellence has conducted. We've also included many of the handouts and letters that we created in the process of organizing our youth forum. Feel free to use the wording of our documents to create your own documents. More information is available on the ACT for Youth website at [www.human.cornell.edu/actforyouth](http://www.human.cornell.edu/actforyouth).

## Step 1: Planning the forum

- Define the purpose of the forum.
- Identify host agency and facilitator.
- Set a realistic time line (it will take several months to put this together).
- Determine date, time, and location of forum.
- Identify the youth who should be at the forum ( consider age, gender, race, SES, geographical area, school districts, etc)
- Identify youth to help with the planning (use existing youth programs, schools to reach young people).
- Set date for planning meeting.

## Step 2: Planning meeting (2-3 hours)

- Set up for planning meeting: consider food, transportation for youth, time--after school hours or weekends
- Prepare planning meeting handouts ([see attachment 1](#))
- Welcome, introduction, agenda ([see attachment 2](#))
- Describe function of this planning meeting; describe/discuss purpose and structure of forum;
- Facilitator will work with youth: Brainstorm activity: *Ideal Community* and *Barriers*; Small group activity to categorize and organize ideas gathered in brainstorm activity; Identify and describe key issues
- Consider who should serve as note takers and adult listeners/panelists
- Discuss leadership roles and assign roles
- Discuss next steps, set next planning meeting with youth

## Step 3: Outreach

- Identify and invite youth to the forum ([see attachment 3](#))
- Invite and confirm listeners/panelists ([see attachment 4](#))
- Publicize forum, invite local press

#### **Step 4: Preparatory meeting with youth leaders**

- Meeting logistics: time, transportation, food
- Facilitator to rehearse leadership roles with youth ([see attachment 5](#))
- Identify recorders and describe role

#### **Step 5: Prepare forum**

- Set up meeting space
- Arrange for food, transportation for youth, permission forms for youth participation ([see attachment 6](#))
- Prepare handouts ([see attachment 7](#))
- Determine selection mechanism to break youth audience into 4-5 work groups
- Prepare attendance list
- Prepare poster with key issues for each work group

#### **Step 6: Forum**

- Welcome, introduction, agenda, evaluation forms ([see attachment 8](#))
- Facilitator supervises work group activities, timing
- Each group has a recorder
- Sequence: work groups, youth report out, response by panelists, close with next steps
- Videotape event
- Create a written report of event ([see attachment 9](#))
- Thank you notes to participants ([see attachment 10](#))

# YOUTH FORUM LEADERSHIP ROLES

## **OUTREACH**

- Spreading the word
- Recruiting other teens
- Describing Youth Forum
- Getting other teens interested
- Generating excitement and enthusiasm

## **MC (1-2 people)**

- Welcoming participants
- Providing orientation and overview
- Introducing listeners
- Introducing youth speakers
- Thank you/Closure

## **Issue Group Leaders (5)**

- Partner with adult
- Pose discussion questions
- Keep discussion on track
- Present group findings/summary to Large Group

## **Recorder (5)**

- Take notes of key points of discussion
- Clarify and restate conclusions and key points
- Organize notes for presentation to Large Group and submission to Center of Excellence and CDPs
- Present findings with group leader to Large Group

## YOUTH FORUM QUESTION AND ANSWER

**Q:** *What is a Youth Forum?*

**A:** A Youth Forum is a structured event to give youth an opportunity to express their ideas, opinions, and needs to decision makers, community staff or to other youth.

**Q:** *What is the purpose of the Youth Forum sponsored by the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence?*

**A:** The purpose of the Youth Forum is to inform and set direction for the Center of Excellence and Community Development Partnerships funded by the ACT for Youth initiative. The process will give youth an important voice that will be seriously considered by adults making decisions about activities and programs.

**Q:** *What is the role of youth in the Youth Forum?*

**A:** Because the purpose of the Youth Forum is to give youth a voice, the role of youth is to creatively and thoughtfully express their ideas on how to improve communities so that they can be the best possible environments for adolescents to live in.

**Q:** *What is the role of Adults?*

**A:** The role of adults at the Youth Forum is to listen carefully to what youth say and to consider how their ideas and opinions can be maximized and incorporated into community planning.

**AGENDA for**  
**YOUTH FORUM PLANNING MEETING**  
August 29, 2000

- Lunch/Introductions 12-12:20
- Overview Act for Youth Initiative/Centers of Excellence 12:20-12:30
- Background of the Youth Forum 12:30-12:40
- Identifying Issues to be discussed at the Forum 12:40-1:40
- BREAK 1:40-1:50
- Identifying "Listeners" for the Forum 1:50-2:05
- Logistics: Roles for Youth 2:05-2:35
- Product that will result from the Forum 2:35-2:45
- Next Steps/Closure 2:45-3:00

EXAMPLE

Attachment 3: Youth Invitation

September 25, 2000

<Youth Coordinator>  
Cornell Cooperative Extension Otsego County  
123 Lake Street  
Cooperstown, NY 13326

Dear <Youth Coordinator>,

The date for the *ACT for Youth* Youth Forum in Rochester is moving closer at a rapid rate! I am writing to give you some additional information about the Youth Bureau Conference, which is hosting our forum. The Forum will take place from 12 – 2PM on October 17. Please try to be there at 11:30AM. We will start promptly at 12noon. Lunch will be provided. Room assignments have not been made yet. This information will be available upon arrival.

If your group is interested in attending workshops prior to or after the Forum, there will not be any registration fees. However, you need to let us know as soon as possible how many young people you are bringing, when are you planning to arrive, when are you planning to leave, and if you are planning to attend workshops. I enclosed a description of the workshops offered on October 17 as well as driving instructions.

Finally, we would like to prepare nametags ahead of time, please send us the names of the young people and staff attending the Forum.

If you have any questions, please call me at 607/255-4108. I am looking forward to seeing you there. This promises to be an exciting event!

Kind regards,

Jutta Dotterweich  
Technical Assistance and Training Coordinator  
ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence

## EXAMPLE

DEAR:

We are writing to invite you to participate in a Youth Forum that will be held during the Association of New York State Youth Bureaus Conference in Rochester, New York on October 17, 2000. The Youth Forum is sponsored by the ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, a newly funded project by the New York State Department of Health, that is working with communities to address youth violence, abuse, risky sexual behavior and promote youth development. The purpose of the Youth Forum is to give youth a voice in the planning of activities and programs for their communities and to provide information to adults making decisions that affect their lives. We believe that truly effective youth programs are marked by high levels of youth involvement -- not just as program recipients, but as valuable resources who give program direction. When youth have a voice -- a voice that's heard and acted on by adults -- they have power to change their world for the better.

We invite you to serve on a Listeners Panel for the Forum. Your role would be to listen to the presentations by youth and then provide a brief (5 minute) acknowledgement and reaction to what has been said. A committee of youth and adults identified you as someone who is in a position of influence that could potentially use the information to promote a better understanding of the needs and realities of young people in New York State.

The Youth Forum will be held at the Hyatt Hotel in Rochester on October 17 from 12-2 pm. We will follow up this letter with a phone call to see whether or not you are able to participate. Should you wish to contact us sooner, please call Jane Powers at 607-255-3993 who is coordinating the event.

Thank you.

# YOUTH FORUM LEADERSHIP ROLES

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## **Recorder (5)**

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- Present findings with group leader to Large Group



EXAMPLE

September 19, 2000

Attachment 6: School Permission Form

To whom it may concern:

Several students from your school have been invited to participate in a Youth Forum that is sponsored by the ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, a newly funded project by the New York State Department of Health, that is working with communities to reduce risk behaviors and promote positive youth development. The Upstate Center of Excellence is a collaboration among Cornell University, the University of Rochester School of Medicine, and the New York State Center of School Safety. Your county, is one of eleven community-based partnerships who were selected as award recipients of the ACT for Youth initiative.

The purpose of the Youth Forum is to give youth a voice in the planning of activities and programs for their communities as well as the State, and to provide information to adults making decisions that affect their lives. We believe that truly effective youth programs are marked by high levels of youth involvement -- not just as program recipients, but as valuable resources who give program direction. When youth have a voice -- a voice that's heard and acted on by adults -- they have power to change their world for the better.

The Youth Forum is being held during the Association of NYS Youth Bureaus Annual Conference in Rochester on October 17, 2000. Youth from all over New York State will be participating in the conference. The Youth Forum will take place from 12-2 pm. Young people will work during the first hour in small groups to identify issues and generate ideas on how to prevent risky behavior and promote well being. During the second hour, the young people will present their ideas and concerns to a panel of decision makers -- who will listen to the youth presentations, and then provide a reaction to what has been said. The Listener Panel will include representatives from the following state agencies: Dept of Education, Department of Health, the Office of Children and Family Services. The Mayor of Rochester will also be serving on the panel of listeners.

There are many benefits for youth who participate in this event. It offers young people an excellent opportunity to develop and practice leadership skills and to learn about how communities, organizations, legislatures, and key government agencies work together. The Youth Forum will enable your students to meet young people from other communities to share ideas and opinions about issues of grave importance. It also teaches young people about being a citizen, about having a voice that is heard -- where what they have to say matters and will contribute to the development of services for other young people in New York State. After this event in Rochester, the young people who have participated, will hopefully continue their community leadership roles and address the unique issues of concern that emerged in the Youth Forum

We seek your permission for these students to participate in the Youth Forum. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact 607-255-7736.

Jane Powers  
Research/Evaluation Coordinator

Jutta Dotterweich  
Training/Technical Assistance Coordinator

## EXAMPLE

September 19, 2000

Attachment 6: Parent Permission Form

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Your child has been invited to participate in a Youth Forum that is sponsored by the ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, a newly funded project by the New York State Department of Health, that is working with communities to reduce risk behaviors and promote positive youth development. The Upstate Center of Excellence is a collaboration among Cornell University, the University of Rochester School of Medicine, and the New York State Center of School Safety.

The purpose of the Youth Forum is to give youth a voice in the planning of activities and programs for their communities as well as the State, and to provide information to adults making decisions that affect their lives. The Youth Forum is being held during the Association of NYS Youth Bureaus Annual Conference in Rochester on October 17, 2000. Youth from all over New York State will be participating in the conference. The Youth Forum will take place from 12-2 pm. Young people will work during the first hour in small groups to identify issues and generate ideas on how to prevent risky behavior and promote well being. During the second hour, the young people will present their ideas and concerns to a panel of decision makers who will listen to the youth presentations, and then provide a reaction to what has been said. The panel will include representatives from several state agencies including the Department of Education, Department of Health, the Office of Children and Family Services, as well as the Mayor of Rochester.

There are many benefits for youth who participate in this event. It offers young people an excellent opportunity to develop and practice leadership skills and to learn about how communities, organizations, legislatures, and key government agencies work together. The Youth Forum will enable your child to meet young people from other communities to share ideas and opinions about issues of grave importance. It also teaches young people about being a citizen, about having a voice that is heard and about contributing to the development of services for other young people in New York State. After this event in Rochester, the young people who have participated, will hopefully continue their community leadership roles and address the unique issues of concern that emerged in the Youth Forum.

We seek your permission so that your child can participate in the Youth Forum. Please sign the attached consent form, noting also whether you will allow your child to appear on the videotaped recording of the event. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at 607-255-7736.

Thank you for your support.

Jane Powers  
Research/Evaluation Coordinator

Jutta Dotterweich  
Training/Technical Assistance Coordinator

EXAMPLE

I give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in  
(name of child)  
the Youth Forum sponsored by the ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence that will be held  
in Rochester, NY on October 17, 2000.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

I give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to appear in the  
(name of child)  
videotaped recording of the Youth Forum sponsored by the ACT for Youth Upstate Center of  
Excellence that will be held in Rochester, NY on October 17, 2000.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



Truly effective youth programs are marked by high levels of youth involvement - not just as program recipients, but as valuable resources who give program direction. When youth have a voice - a voice that's heard and acted on by adults - they have power to change their world for the better.

# IDEAL COMMUNITY

Safe places to go/a way to have fun safely

Good school system

Fair treatment at school

More jobs for teens

Activities for youth

Opportunity for all youth to  
participate in sports programs

No racism

Everyone listens to each other

Community involvement

# **BARRIERS TO AN IDEAL COMMUNITY**

Budget restraints

Low paying job opportunities for teens

Drugs and alcohol

Adults and media  
misperception of the real issues

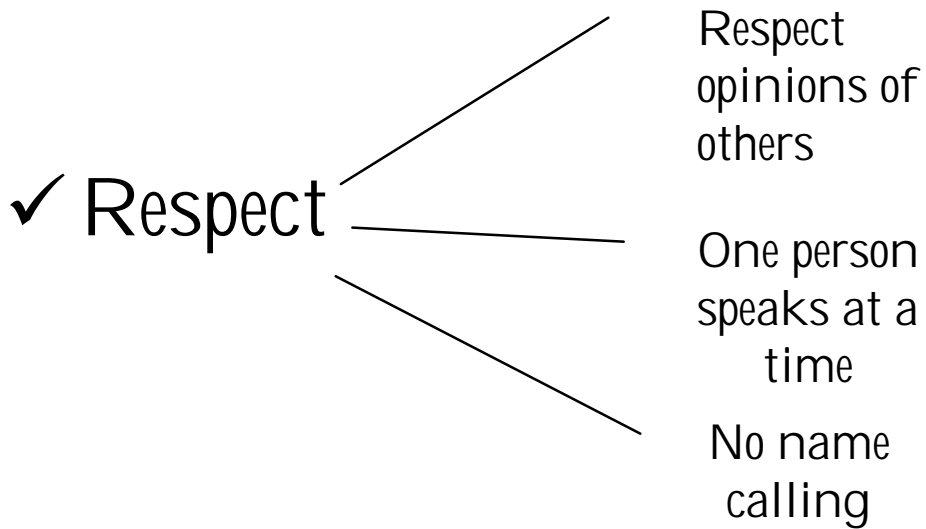
Adults and media double standards

Gangs and violence

Peer pressure/ Need for acceptance

Not enough money or room in schools for  
sports and activities that students want

# Ground Rules



- ✓ No foul language
- ✓ Think about what you want to say
- ✓ Try to participate in any way you can
- ✓ Be free in your thinking

# AGENDA FOR YOUTH FORUM

## OCTOBER 17, 2000

- I. Introduction and Orientation (15 minutes)
- II. Issue Groups (45 minutes)
- III. Large Group Forum (40 minutes)
  - Introduction of listeners
  - Report out of issue groups
- IV. Listeners' Reactions (15 minutes)
- V. Closure (5 minutes)



EXAMPLE

<p>YOUTH FORUM</p>	<p><i>October 17, 2000</i></p> <p>Rochester, NY</p>
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# Youth Forum

Facilitated by:

Barbara Jaklitsch



## Masters of Ceremonies

*Dana Dutcher, Oswego County  
Daniel Nova, Albany County  
Justin Wright, Onondaga County*

## Group Leaders

*Zach Barris, Monroe County  
Dana Dutcher, Oswego County  
Greg Riley, Monroe County  
Joseph Solomon, Monroe County  
Arthur Willett, Cattaraugus County*

## Video

*Daniel Nova, Albany County  
Justin Gebauer, Cattaraugus County*

## Listener Panel

**Commissioner John Johnson** *NYS Office of Children and Family Services*

**Mayor William Johnson** *Mayor of Rochester, N.Y.*

**Nancy Zahler** *Tompkins County Youth Bureau;  
Vice President of NYS Youth Bureau Association*

**Frank Zallo** *NYS Department of Health;  
Bureau of Child and Adolescent Health*



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# Upstate Center of Excellence ACT for Youth

*The Youth Forum is sponsored by  
the ACT for Youth Upstate Center  
of Excellence, a collaborative  
project of Cornell University's  
Family Life Development Center,  
University of Rochester School of  
Medicine, and the New York State  
Center of School Safety.*

*The ACT for Youth Initiative is  
funded by the New York State  
Department of Health.*

EXAMPLE

## Youth Leader Participants

Thank you for participating in the ACT for Youth Youth Forum. Please tell us what you thought about the event.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I found the issue group discussion valuable	1	2	3	4
I was given an opportunity to express my ideas and opinions	1	2	3	4
I believe that the adults at the YF really listened to what the youth had to say	1	2	3	4
I liked the format of the Youth Forum (small group discussion with reporting back to the large group)	1	2	3	4
I felt that young people played an important role in this event	1	2	3	4
I felt prepared for my leadership role	1	2	3	4
I would recommend having more Youth Forums in the future	1	2	3	4
If I had the chance, I would volunteer to be a leader at another Youth Forum	1	2	3	4
I would like to work with adults in my community to figure out ways to improve services for youth and make communities better places for kids	1	2	3	4

This is what I liked most about the Youth Forum:

This is what I liked least about the Youth Forum:

If there were to be another Youth Forum, this is what I would change to improve it:

EXAMPLE

October 27, 2000

«FirstName» «LastName»  
«OrganizationName»  
«Address»  
«City», «State» «PostalCode»

Dear «FirstName»:

On behalf of the ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, we want to thank you for your assistance with the Youth Forum. You played an instrumental role in bringing the youth participants to the conference, and supporting them through the process.

We were all inspired by the ideas and suggestions voiced by the young people on how to improve their communities. We hope that the youth who attended the Forum will stay actively involved in their local communities in promoting an open dialogue between adults and young people, and will take some of their wonderful ideas and make them a reality.

This "youth voice" event was our first step in laying the groundwork for future youth participation activities throughout the state. We would like to hear what you thought about the event and how we could change it to make it better next time. We are particularly interested in your perspective on how the youth experienced this event. Please complete the enclosed evaluation form and send it back to us in the self-addressed stamped envelope.

Once again, thank you for your time and effort in making the Youth Forum such a success!

Sincerely,

Jane Powers  
Evaluation/Research Coordinator

Jutta Dotterweich  
Training/Technical Assistance  
Coordinator

EXAMPLE

October 26, 2000

Dear *Listener*:

On behalf of the ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, we want to thank you for serving on the listener panel for our Youth Forum. Your thoughtful and inspirational comments were much appreciated by the youth participants and all who attended the event. We have received enthusiastic reports from the youth about the value of this experience. From our feedback forms, we learned what one youth liked most about the Youth Forum:

" I enjoyed all the speakers. I believe that all of these adults really do care and understand (at least a little bit) what teens really want."

We hope that the youth who attended the Forum will stay actively involved in their local communities in promoting an open dialogue between adults and young people, and will take some of their wonderful ideas and make them a reality.

This "youth voice" event was our first step in laying the groundwork for future youth participation activities throughout the state. Thanks for taking the time to make the trip, and for your support in making the Youth Forum such a success!

Sincerely,

Jane Powers  
Research/Evaluation Coordinator

Jutta Dotterweich  
Training/Technical Assistance  
Coordinator