



# Youth at the Center: Insights from Youth for Youth Development Professionals

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On July 28, 2022 Fair Chance DC and MENTOR Maryland|DC co-hosted Youth at the Center: Community Building Forum, a one day event designed for executives of youth serving and mentoring organizations in DC and the surrounding metro region. Because we know we are much stronger together and even more so when we truly center youth, the event featured youth speakers, panelists, and young people as subject matter experts.

Daon McLarin Johnson, Program Outreach and Support Director of MENTOR Maryland|DC and Gretchen Van der Veer, CEO of Fair Chance, welcomed the full room of more than 80 participants and set the stage for the day. The purpose of the event was to elevate and articulate the importance of youth voices throughout all phases of a youth development nonprofit organization's programming, policies, and procedures. To emphasize and model this approach, the Forum engaged youth from across DC and Maryland as subject matters experts throughout the day.



## OPENING PLENARY

# State of the Youth Address: A Conversation about the Issues Facing Today's Youth

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The opening plenary was moderated by 18-year-old David Adams, a resident of Washington, DC's Ward 7 and a rising sophomore at George Mason University studying psychology, and Sawida Kamara, a Capacity Building Specialist at Fair Chance with over 15 years of experience working with small, mid-sized and large organizations in the nonprofit, government and quasi-public arenas.

The session was designed to learn about the key issues facing young people in the DC region from the young people themselves. A panel of middle-school, high school, and college students shared their perspectives and stories on a range of topics in response to questions from the moderators, including the state of mental health, hopes and fears about their futures, how adults can be more supportive, and what they are most anxious about.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Today's youth are facing a myriad of issues that are constantly encroaching upon their ability to enjoy their youth, educate their minds, and remain hopeful about their future. Schools and youth-serving organizations must continue to provide forums and safe spaces for holistic and healthy conversations promoting self-empowerment and efficacy.

**“Dream big, embrace who you are and your story. Don’t be afraid to reach out and ask questions. Take challenges as an opportunity to learn and growth. Most importantly know that you are enough.”**

— Jessica Aguilar-Rios,

*Collegiate Directions / First year Graduate Student – University of Maryland*

## PANEL I

# State of Mind – The Youth Mental Health Crisis

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The first panel, during which young people discussed strategies for maintaining mental health and emotional wellbeing, was moderated by Tre'von Davis, a rising senior at Delaware State University majoring in Sports Management, and Jessica Aguilar Rios, a Collegiate Directors Scholar pursuing her master's in social work degree from the University of Maryland.

The discussion focused on issues of school safety and strategies for accessing mental health services in a school-based environment. One panelist explained that because schools are not perceived as “safe spaces,” they are not conducive environments for students to feel comfortable accessing mental health services. Suggested strategies for making students feel more comfortable in a school setting included giving them time to cool off when angry rather than reacting immediately, giving them additional freedoms to create two-way trust, and taking more time to listen to students so they feel heard. Students expressed that they are anxious about issues ranging from fitting in to workload to deciding their future.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Students crave an avenue for expressing themselves without judgement from adults.

**“Schools are not comfortable with students’ emotions. They don’t listen to students, they just tell. As a result, students do not trust the adults in schools and so they can’t trust the mental health people at school.”**

— Skyy Branch,

*8<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Brookland Middle School*

## PANEL II

# State of Preparation – Career & College Readiness for Our Youth

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In this discussion, moderated by Dr. Serena Lewis, Academy Director for Words Beats & Life Inc., and Sarai Escalona, a rising freshman at Catholic University pursuing a business degree, panelists shared what was helpful in their preparation for life after high school and what was missing for them.

Numerous participants expressed the importance of mentors in their lives, including teachers, coaches, and family members, who took a particular interest in them and were able to guide and advise them. There was a consensus that students lacked important information about the cost of college, available scholarships, and what specific steps are needed to position themselves for both college acceptance and enrollment. Several students expressed frustration with parents pushing them to pursue careers they were not interested in because those professions “pay well.”

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Parents and teachers should let students talk through their ideas and decide for themselves what they want to do.

**“Parents and mentors should not look to the money but support students doing what they love.”**

— Isaiah Henson,

*8<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Brookland Middle School*

## PANEL III:

# State of Emergency – Safe Schools & Safe Communities for Our Youth

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In this panel, moderated by Ricardo Cooper, Executive Director for RISE DC, and co-moderator Kyando Baylor, a junior at Bell Multicultural High School, student panelists shared their concerns and desires for public and school safety.

Referencing multiple school shootings that have come to the forefront of local and national attention, all students concurred with the heightened sense of fear that has become a normal component of their everyday existence. Whether walking in their neighborhoods on the way to campus or utilizing public transit to and from school, students candidly shared the negative effects of violence to their learning environments. Students also expressed concern with adults who minimize the correlation between a student’s safety and their ability to learn.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

School districts, administrators, teachers and community-based organizations must continue to advocate for safe spaces for young people to learn and thrive.

**“I don’t feel safe walking home from school. I am constantly looking over my shoulder to make sure nothing is about to happen.”**

— Izaiah Glosson,

*9<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, McKinley Tech*

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

# Why Youth Voice is Essential in Your Organization

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In her keynote address, Toni Lewis, Executive Director of the Foundation for the Advancement of Music and Education (FAME), emphasized the importance of putting students at the center of the conversation, including asking them about their challenges, goals, and needs.

As a graduate of Fair Chance's Ready for Work Nonprofit Capacity Building Initiative, Lewis shared her learned experiences about the importance of including youth voices when applying for grants and seeking funding from philanthropists and individual donors. Issues for organizations to identify include:

- How are youth used to effect systems change in your organization?
- Is youth leadership incorporated into programming? What are the outcomes?
- Are youth involved decision making? Are youth given tools to express themselves? Is your organization connected to local culture?
- Are the holistic needs of young people being met? (e.g. social, material, health, and educational wellbeing)

Ms. Lewis went on to highlight her five key learnings from the day:

- Youth voices count most and they must be heard and celebrated
- Students need tools and training on how to advocate for themselves and amplify their voices
- Trust is key at all levels and situations in their lives – from home, school, government, and nonprofits
- Youth serving nonprofits need to receive regular feedback from youth on what is and is not working
- Mental health support and resources are needed now more than ever

## PANEL IV

# Brainstorming – Your Organization’s Next Steps

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In the final panel, Valarie Ashley, Director of Prince George’s County Programs at Fair Chance, and Andrew Lolavar, Program Outreach and Support at MENTOR MD|DC, led a discussion about how organizations can best incorporate youth voice into their development programs.

**V – Voice.** Youth Voice must be imbedded in your organization’s values. Each organization should make a concerted effort to include the concept of youth voice in their mission and vision statements as well as strategic planning documents.

**O – Opportunities.** Each organization should provide the young people they serve with copious OPPORTUNITIES to participate at the Board level as well as organizational leadership sessions, and events. Create a youth ambassador program to assist your organization in various capacities from recruitment to logistics and be a bridge between youth participants and staff. Provide ambassadors with appropriate training and pay them for their time and effort.

**I – Incorporate.** Incorporate Youth Voice in organizational planning. Allow youth to take part in 1,3,5-year organizational planning as well as the planning for weekly programming, field trips and events.

**C – Commit.** Commit budget lines and financial resources to and for Youth Voice. Provide youth with honorariums, fees for consultative services, name, image and likeness (NIL), and board participation.

**E – Evaluation.** Allow youth to participate in all levels of an organization’s evaluative process.





## For Youth Development Professionals

For those looking to improve engagement of youth voice throughout your organization's policies and practices, start by asking the following questions:

- Where can I do a better job of listening to the young people I serve without judging?
- What are the various vehicles within my organization for soliciting, capturing, and acting on youth input? Surveys? Focus groups? Online anonymous polls?
- What challenges have I experienced in development and maintaining effective youth relationships during Covid and in the context of an online environment?
- How can I mitigate those challenges?
- How might I partner and collaborate with other youth development organizations to better engage and meet the needs of the young people in my program?
- In what ways have I been intentional about celebrating the young people in my program?
- How could I include more opportunities to celebrate them?
- Have I been clear about parameters and guard rails and then provided opportunities for choice within those parameters?
- What level of trust have I earned with the young people I serve and what can I do to further build ongoing trust?
- What are the ways that we can amplify the collective voices of the youth we serve?

### Hot Tip for Youth Development Professionals

The Weikert Center for Youth Program Quality, a program of the Forum for Youth Investment provides technical assistance for youth development programs on the above and can conduct an assessment of your practices and policies and make recommendations for improving youth voice. See their website at <https://forumfyi.org/weikertcenter/>.

# In Closing: Key Learnings

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Sadiq Ali, Executive Director, MENTOR Maryland|DC and Gretchen Van der Veer, CEO, Fair Chance concluded the day-long program by lifting up the key learnings for youth serving and mentoring organization executives and leadership.

- Partnerships in our work are essential if we are going to best support young people. We cannot do it alone.
- Relationships must be at the center of our work. We need to be intentional and take time to move through the barriers of differing ages, identities, races, and more, to build trust.
- Feelings are important to young people. Instead of asking them “what do you think?” ask them “how do you feel or how did that make you feel?” Young people want to be heard without judgement.
- The collective voice is fundamental to our work. All of the stories that were shared were motivating and empowering for the professionals in the room. Coming together is crucial for our mental health and we need to continue to do it.

**“As one of the organizers we wanted youth development professionals to hear and learn from young people and think about how we might incorporate our learnings into our practices. However, what happened, is that it provided an opportunity for people to really feel heard and mutually supported. Young people took the stage, and the adults listened. The young people were vulnerable and that allowed the adults to be vulnerable. There was mutual respect which enabled people to think differently.”**

— Daon McLarin Johnson,

*Program Outreach & Support Manager - DC Metro Market, MENTOR Maryland | DC*