

THE INAUGURAL
OAYI
YOUTH
SUMMIT



**Embracing the
Youth Experience**

Written by Darian Appleton

This summer, the inaugural OAYI Youth Summit: Embracing the Youth Experience was hosted in Orlando, Florida, and it was transformative! This youth-centered training event united emerging and seasoned leaders committed to addressing the nation's opioid, stimulant, and substance use crisis. The summit—facilitated by members of the Youth National Opioid Wellness (YNOW) Task Force, OAYI's Youth Advisory Board—brought together a group of dynamic young leaders, youth-serving professionals, and community advocates from the OAYI network for a 2-day experience of inspiration, learning, and action.

The keynote address kicked off the exploration of the intersection between substance use and mental health and its immense impact on young people. Dr. Sunny Patel, senior advisor, Children, Youth and Families, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA), opened the event by emphasizing the importance of collaboration and youth engagement in developing and implementing solutions

and examined how to establish comprehensive care for young people and their families across the continuum.

In alignment with our approach to amplifying the voices and perspectives of youth, members of the YNOW Task Force gave providers deeper insight into the intersectional challenges and barriers young people face, highlighting the power of trauma-informed care and youth leadership and empowerment.

YNOW Task Force members Ana and Ayshah partnered with Bodhi practice owner and clinical psychotherapist Jesse Fairchild to help providers better understand how to integrate trauma-informed mental health support into their ongoing engagement with young people and leverage practical tools that strengthen their responses. Task Force members Brooklyn and Oli, along with Dr. Sean Siebert, founder of Invent Yourself, LLC, used their collective expertise to promote collaborative action toward empowering youth to harness their strengths and pursue leadership

roles within their communities.

While providers engaged in youth-led sessions and open discussions to better support their community efforts, Task Force members Alberto, Charlie, Danie, Desiree, Emily, and Lizzie, as well as Dr. Phil Breitenbucher, associate professor of social work, California Baptist University, engaged with the youth leaders representing various OAYI-awarded project sites in curated workshops designed to cultivate essential skills for effective youth leadership and professional development.

Through education and interaction, youth explored key components of leadership such as organization and time management, networking, and self-advocacy. All emerging leaders had an individual *résumé*/goal review session guided by a research-based outline of recommendations and tips for success and participated in a mock legislative hearing where they were tasked with advocating for a specific issue related to substance use and mental health support, the child welfare system, or

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juvenile justice reform that they are particularly passionate about. These independent and team-building activities empowered the youth to embrace their voices and leverage both their lived experiences and their new skills to inform solutions and create change in their respective communities.

One of the summit's stand-out features was the two-part panel discussion, "Bridging the Gap: Breaking Generational Barriers to Build Collaborative Connections." In speaking with the seasoned leaders representing OAYI programs from across the country and the emerging leaders of the YNOW Task Force, we examined the unique perspectives, attitudes, and experiences of different generations as they shared how they are bridging divides, specifically within substance use prevention and intervention programming. Panelists

identified common challenges and areas for collaboration, as well as effective solutions for dismantling generational barriers and rebuilding healthy, sustainable partnerships with the young people in their communities.

In our final embrace of the OAYI Youth Summit experience, participants were given an opportunity to translate their knowledge into practice through an action-planning session informed by the YAB-developed engagement toolkit, Youth Engagement in Action: Tools for Leveraging Youth Perspectives to Enhance Engagement With Emerging Leaders. Designed to emphasize substance use as an intersectional public health crisis and promote the implementation and sustainment of collaborative approaches that involve both youth and providers in addressing its impact, the toolkit featured key elements that were used to create a foundation for broader engagement among participants from each site represented as they scoped out actionable ways to demonstrate

their commitment to the issues present in their communities.

The OAYI Youth Summit highlighted the importance of youth voices in shaping the future of the field. Participants walked away with a renewed sense of purpose, ready to empower and engage effectively. The event reinforced IIR's and OAYI's commitment to creating spaces where young people are not just heard but are active participants in decision-making and social change. By collaborating with the YNOW Task Force as equal partners and leveraging the experience of other stakeholders from diverse disciplines, we continue to strengthen our efforts to bridge gaps in the field and cultivate safer communities.

Stay connected with us so you do not miss the launch of the summit's dynamic panel discussion as a new segment on "Answering the Call," OAYI's podcast; a highlight video recapping the key takeaways of the summit; and the Task Force's youth engagement toolkit!

