

Engaging Youth Expertise: Evaluation of a Youth-Led Substance Use Prevention Model Centering Lived Experience

Erin Harris, MPH¹, Abigail Steiner, MS MPH², Sedona Allen Moreno¹, Judith Shlay MD MSPH^{1,3}, Sarah Belstock, MSPH¹

(1) The Public Health Institute at Denver Health, Denver Health and Hospital Authority

(2) Center for Health Systems Research – Office of Research, Denver Health and Hospital Authority

(3) Department of Family Medicine, University of Colorado School of Medicine, Aurora, Colorado

Submitted 12 December 2024, revised 5 August 2025, accepted 27 August 2025.

ABSTRACT

Background: Young people with lived experience of substance use are not consistently engaged in shaping local prevention efforts. The Engaging Youth Expertise (EYE) for Prevention Model was created to involve youth aged 13-25 with lived experience to identify and address gaps in prevention infrastructure.

Objective: This paper describes the evaluation of a model for engaging youth with lived experience to identify key drivers of substance use and to help shape programming aimed at prevention.

Methods: Youth Leaders completed a baseline and ongoing 6- month experience evaluation assessing knowledge, skills, abilities and youth-adult interaction domains. A focus group was held in October 2023 to gather additional insights. Exiting leaders completed an optional survey to reflect on their experience and suggest improvements. Quantitative data were analyzed using paired t-tests ($\alpha < 0.05$). Qualitative data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis.

Results: Eighteen Youth Leaders participated from 10 to 29 months (median: 16 months; IQR: 12 months). Improvements were seen in socio-political skills, participatory behavior, and youth decision making from baseline to final timepoint evaluations. Qualitative findings from evaluations, exit surveys, and the focus group emphasized gains in social emotional skills, mental health, reduced intent/desire to use substances, and stronger peer/community connections. Youth also reported engaging in broader community prevention efforts.

Conclusion: The EYE for Prevention Model is an effective, adaptable approach for engaging youth with lived experience. This evaluation highlights key components others can tailor to amplify youth voices and equip them to drive positive change in their communities.

KEYWORDS: Youth Substance Use; Community-Based Participatory Research; United States; Program Evaluation; Public Health; Mental Health; Substance Use Prevention; Positive Youth Development; Youth Leadership

Introduction

Substance use among youth in the U.S. has been declining over the past decade, but roughly a third of high school youth still report current substance use. Broken down by substance, 22% of high school students reported current alcohol use; 17% reported current marijuana use; and 4% reported currently taking prescription pain medicine without a prescription or differently than how a doctor told them to use it.¹ Despite the decline in substance use, there has been a concerning simultaneous increase in drug overdose mortality among youth nationally, with most being categorized as unintentional.² Colorado is among one of three states, including Arizona and Washington, that had nearly twice the national average for adolescent overdose deaths in 2020-2022.²

To effectively address these issues, prevention strategies must be undertaken with an understanding of the context, needs, and perspectives of the communities that they aim to serve. Evidence suggests that engaging persons with personal experience is essential to understanding the drivers of substance use and to identify and inform effective sustainable prevention strategies.³ Local substance use prevention activities are often informed by population-level data, such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which provide an understanding of the scope of substance use across all youth. Local data specific to youth that engage in substance use and the key drivers of youth substance use have not consistently been gathered or considered. Additionally, while youth have increasingly been involved in the development, implementation, and evaluation of local prevention efforts, this engagement has primarily focused on the general youth population.^{4,5,6} Youth with lived experience—i.e., those who engage in substance use—have not been intentionally engaged to lead this work, despite their unique insights. As a result, interventions may not reflect the needs of those at highest risk. Lastly, existing efforts often lack

consistent evaluation measures to assess the impact of engagement on youth participants themselves.⁵ This paper aims to add to the body of literature regarding youth engagement by 1) describing a new model for engaging this critical subset of youth in the design and deployment of substance use prevention initiatives and 2) providing a framework and tools to evaluate the overall impact of such engagement on youth participants.

The Engaging Youth Expertise (EYE) for Prevention Model

To intentionally engage youth with lived experience with substance use, The Public Health Institute at Denver Health (PHIDH) created the Engaging Youth Expertise (EYE) for Prevention Model (EYE Model). The EYE Model centered on hiring a group of Youth Leaders with lived experience to address gaps in local prevention infrastructure related to 1) mechanisms for collecting and interpreting local substance use data specific to the experiences and prevention needs of youth with lived experience and 2) processes for engaging youth with lived experience in the development, implementation, and evaluation of local prevention strategies.⁷

Establishment of the EYE for Prevention Youth Leadership Team (EYE YLT)

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Positive Youth Development (PYD) model incorporates the development of skills, opportunities, and authentic relationships into programs, practices, and policies that enable young people to reach their full potential.⁸ In accordance with this evidence-based framework, EYE YLT adopted structures that engaged youth as partners and were strengths-based, inclusive, collaborative, and sustainable. In consideration of the EYE YLT's lived experiences, the integration of trauma-informed approaches was also emphasized.

In 2021, PHIDH onboarded a program specialist to lead and facilitate the EYE YLT. This facilitator had lived experience, community connections, strong interpersonal skills, and a

notable ability to connect with youth. The facilitator led the initial recruitment of Youth Leaders through a network approach by sharing electronic application materials with 200 agencies within PHIDH's youth health partner network, which included local schools, youth-oriented community-based organizations, and youth-serving mental health and substance use service providers who had previously partnered with PHIDH to address youth health needs. Ongoing recruitment expanded to utilize Youth Leaders' networks at later stages in the project. Eligibility criteria included being between 13-25 years of age and having lived experience (personal or familial) with substance use. Eligible youth were invited to participate in a group interview process with PHIDH staff that was later expanded to involve current Youth Leaders. Selected applicants were onboarded and oriented to the project by the facilitator. Informed consent was obtained from Youth Leaders and parents, if under 18. Youth Leaders were paid the hourly minimum wage for their time and expertise, an important part of authentic youth engagement.⁹ The EYE YLT met at a minimum twice a month for an hour and a half in a virtual or hybrid format. The facilitator organized and led the meetings with assistance and input from Youth Leaders. Meeting time consisted of planning youth-led activities in support of project objectives and developing the Youth Leaders' skills pertinent to project implementation and self-growth. In alignment with identified needs, additional PHIDH staff and external youth-serving professionals were invited to join meetings to provide training and support youth in their planning. The EYE YLT was empowered to provide feedback and make decisions regarding data collection and analysis, attendance at community events, training and presentations for youth and youth-serving adults, and designing prevention-oriented messaging and activities. Decisions occurred through majority rule. To support sustained engagement, the facilitator initiated regular email and text

message communication with the EYE YLT outside of meetings to share updates and met individually with those who needed additional support to complete tasks.

The Work and Progress of the EYE YLT

The EYE YLT worked to understand drivers of substance use as well as factors supporting prevention. They then designed and implemented programs to foster positive behaviors surrounding mental health and well-being. Some example projects included developing a prevention messaging campaign, implementing a youth PhotoVoice project, providing trainings to youth-serving adults, giving educational presentations to youth within the community, hosting healing events, and designing and implementing a summer youth art program to highlight healthy coping mechanisms. Youth Leaders also participated in analyzing qualitative data collected through project evaluations to inform quality improvement, assisted with the writing and review of research articles for publication, and recruited and hired additional Youth Leaders.

To date, the prevention strategies that were designed and implemented by the EYE YLT have reached over 3,600 young people. Youth who engaged in these prevention interventions reported significant changes to their awareness of local resources, intended use of healthy coping strategies, and likelihood of using substances. Additionally, this group has provided training to over 2,100 adults who serve youth, resulting in increased capacity among local youth-serving organizations to understand and mobilize in response to youth needs.

Methods

This retrospective evaluation synthesizes the quantitative and qualitative findings of the four components of the EYE evaluation (Figure 1). Data collection and analysis occurred between April 2022 to April 2024. Youth Leaders completed a baseline experience evaluation

electronically within a few months of being hired and onboarded (Appendix 1). The baseline evaluation consisted of 33 questions that assessed seven domains related to: attitudes and abilities;¹⁰ Social Emotional Skills;¹¹ and perception of the organization's standing on the Colorado Youth Engagement Continuum.^{12, 13} Youth Leaders completed an ongoing experience evaluation every six-months that consisted of 64 questions that assessed 11 domains (Appendix 2). These domains included the seven baseline domains with the addition of interaction ratings between youth, between adults, and between youth and adults,¹⁴ along with a domain that assessed supports both for success in participation and for well-being (specifically related to mental health, substance use, and connection to peers).

Youth Leaders who transitioned out of the EYE YLT were asked to complete an optional, nine question, open-ended exit survey to gain an understanding of their overall experience and why they were leaving the EYE YLT (Appendix 3). Key topics addressed in the exit survey are described in Figure 1. In October 2023, Youth Leaders participated in a virtual focus group to gain a deeper understanding of their experience with the EYE YLT. The focus group was modeled on the exit survey (see Figure 1) and was facilitated by the project evaluator and epidemiologist using a semi-structured format with nine questions (Appendix 4). It was recorded and transcribed after receiving consent from all participants.

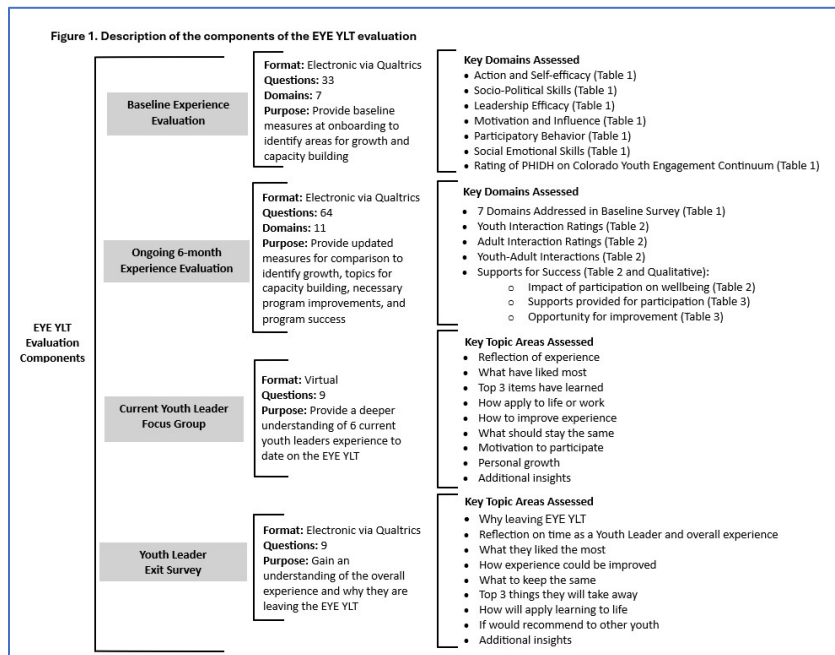


Figure 1. Description of the components of the EYE YLT evaluation

All surveys were collected electronically via Qualtrics. Responses for all evaluation components were de-identified to ensure confidentiality. This project was reviewed by the Quality Improvement Committee of Denver Health, authorized by the Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado, Denver, and was determined not to be human subjects' research.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to represent demographic and participation information about Youth Leaders. For questions associated with attitudes and abilities, social emotional skills, and perspectives on the youth engagement continuum, means and standard deviations were derived from responses at baseline and at final time point. For questions associated with interaction and meeting support, data for the first time point were derived from responses at the first ongoing survey conducted after baseline, as this is the first time these questions were

administered. Participants who only had one instance of answering youth-adult interaction questions were excluded from the pre/post analysis of means for these four domains. For Youth Leaders no longer participating in the program, final timepoint was defined as the date of the individual's last evaluation completed before exiting the program; for Youth Leaders still participating as of September 1, 2024, final timepoint was defined as April 1, 2024, as this was the most recent evaluation completed. Statistical significance in the change in mean between initial and final timepoint was assessed using paired t-tests ($\alpha < 0.05$). All quantitative analyses were conducted using SAS Enterprise Guide (version 8.3; SAS Institute).

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative responses from the experience evaluations, exit surveys, and the focus group were compiled and de-identified. Project staff made up of the project evaluator, program specialist, and epidemiologist individually reviewed responses using inductive thematic analysis. The emerging themes were discussed by the project staff to confirm resonance and identify areas for additional examination. The analysis was considered complete when the team agreed on the resultant categories and the findings resonated with staff. The agreed-upon categories were shared with the Youth Leaders to ensure accurate capture of their experience. Once Youth Leaders provided their feedback and confirmation the categories were considered complete. All qualitative analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti Qualitative Analysis Software (version 24; Lumivero, LLC).

Results

Quantitative Findings

During the project period, 18 unique Youth Leaders participated in the EYE YLT. Individuals participated as Youth Leaders from 10 to 29 months (median: 16 months; IQR: 12

months). Fourteen Youth Leaders provided demographic data: 79% were youth of color and 50% identified as LGBTQ+.

Table 1 shows the results of the experience evaluation administered at baseline and again at the final timepoint. In the domain of Socio-Political Skills, youth knowledge of ‘how city rules and policies are made’ significantly increased ($p=0.01$); measurement of the skills associated with all three subdomains in Participatory Behavior also increased significantly ($p<0.01$, 0.01 , and 0.03 , respectively). While no other statistically significant measurements were found, most means started and remained high.

Table 2 shows the results of Youth Leader reflections on their interactions with each other and adult project staff. Twelve Youth Leaders had more than one instance of answering youth-adult interaction questions. Youth perception of ‘youth rely on themselves to make key decisions’ significantly increased from first measurement to final measurement ($p<0.01$). While no other statistically significant measurements were found, most means started high and remained high.

Qualitative Findings

Themes arising from qualitative data collected from youth experience evaluations, exit surveys, and a focus group discussion are organized under key topic areas: EYE Model; Supports Provided; Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs); Impact on Self; Impact on Community; Youth Engagement Continuum; and Opportunity for Improvement (Table 3). In depth exploration into each topic area and associated themes are described below.

EYE Model

Youth Leaders emphasized the importance of the EYE YLT’s strengths-based approach and alignment with principles of PYD.⁸ This approach facilitated their role as experts and

fostered their sense of safety and belonging. As one Youth Leader noted, participating in this model “Has tremendously helped me improve as member of the community and has given me the platform to voice things I’m passionate about. But has also provided me a community where I feel safe and heard.”

One key success factor for the model that youth referenced repeatedly included having a facilitator with lived experience, excellent interpersonal skills, and strong community connections. Youth Leaders also noted having supportive and caring project staff that work with, and advocate for, the EYE YLT throughout the project was another key component of success. These factors allowed for trust and relationship building among the Youth Leaders and between Youth Leaders and adults.

Supports Provided

Creating a trauma-informed and inclusive environment was a key support identified by youth. One Youth Leader shared, “I have a space where I’m on a team where the leadership is shared where I feel supported in everything that I do and where I feel safe to be my authentic self.” The Youth Leaders identified that flexibility in meetings, clear communication, compensation, and mental health resources contributed to their full engagement.

Recognizing Youth Leaders as whole individuals and offering opportunities for self-care were also key supports. One youth noted, “I know that when I show up to an in-person meeting, not only am I gonna be able to have my voice heard and actually affect what we're doing, but I'm also going to get food, mental health support, you know, self-care is my homework, stuff that just really highlights that we are all like growing, living beings.” Other key components highlighted by Youth Leaders were manageable workloads and covering or reimbursing for attendance at conferences.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs)

Through the EYE Model and the supports provided, Youth Leaders developed key KSAs, particularly in action and self-efficacy. They gained creative thinking, overdose prevention skills and awareness, community engagement, research, and public speaking skills. One Youth Leader said, “They have given me a space to voice my ideas... develop my leadership skills... and resources to learn more about substance misuse.”

Youth Leaders also developed project management and research skills, including shaping logic models, event planning, task delegation, and data analysis. A notable example is the Summer Arts Program, where they led the qualitative analysis for the program evaluation, skills often acquired in college or professional settings. They further honed socio-political KSAs, such as advocacy tools, public health knowledge, and leadership efficacy, empowering them to share mental health and substance use resources with peers and community members.

Participatory behavior improved through enhanced communication, collaboration, and peer learning. Additionally, social-emotional skills were strengthened, boosting self-confidence and motivation. As one Youth Leader shared, “One of the biggest changes for me has been an increase in confidence and my willingness to take initiative... I’m learning how to take up space and to speak up.”

Impact on Self: Mental Health, Substance Use, and Connection to Peers and Community

The skills Youth Leaders developed through the EYE Model improved their mental health, reduced substance use desires, and strengthened connections with themselves and their communities. Participation was healing for many, fostering self-love, empowerment, and hope for the future. One Youth Leader shared, “Having a group and people to be around, like having

that community is such a preventative outlet for me.” Youth Leaders felt fulfilled, productive, and saw how their involvement aligned with future career goals.

They also deepened their connections with others, learning new ways to support and care for each other. The facilitator fostered team building and ensured all voices were heard. This sense of connection reinforced the importance of community and peer support. As one youth noted, “Substance use, suicides, and other mental health issues are prevented with connectivity, and I’m reminded of those preventative things when I attend these meetings, and we have really positive conversations around those difficult topics.”

A key aspect of this connection was feeling safe and heard within the group, allowing for vulnerability and personal growth. As one youth said, “Our meetings can feel like a healthy form of group therapy.” Activities like meditation and meeting new people further strengthened their sense of community. The overall sentiment was that youth are very committed to remaining engaged in the EYE YLT. “Each Youth Leader is given a platform to shine in different ways based on each individual’s strengths while also supporting each other and being mindful of our collective and individual challenges.” One Youth Leader stated, “I am grateful for my opportunity to participate in this experience and hope that more youth also get the opportunity to participate in the coming months or years.”

Impact on Community

The Youth Leaders noted that the development of KSAs and strengthened connections to themselves and their peers enabled them to meaningfully impact their community. Their lived experiences and motivation to make changes for others in the community kept them engaged in providing peers in the community with skills, resources, and preventive outlets. As one youth shared, “I feel like we’re all so passionate about [this work], and that motivates me to be as

active as I can.” As the youth team grew, they expanded their community engagement—from presenting to adults to leading youth events and designing prevention strategies like the Summer Arts Program. One youth noted, “We’re not just sitting at our computers talking about it... we’re also taking that action piece.”

Engaging with youth and adults at events, they learned the power of their voices. One leader said, “That really showed me... I still have worth, like valuable things to say.” Networking with others has helped strengthen their work, allowing them to share resources and increase awareness of substance use and mental health support. Even youth leaving the team felt the impact: “Joining social groups like this coalition... can really encourage you to broaden your ideas and meet new people.”

Youth Engagement Continuum

When asked to rate PHIDH on the Colorado Youth Engagement Continuum,^{12,13} most Youth Leaders consistently rated PHIDH at the "Shared Leadership" level, valuing the collaborative, youth-led approach. Youth appreciated having a voice in decision-making and building a trusting partnership with adults. One youth noted, “Youth and adults actively collaborate...and share roles in making decisions. The group is not divided between adults and youth but rather we are a part of a trusting partnership.” Youth highlighted that the work is led by youth, and youth are impacting decisions. As another youth noted, “They allow us to have a voice even in spaces where youth are usually undermined. I have seen things that youth have voiced and advocated for...come into place. We’ve reached broader communities through our work at conferences and bigger events. I never feel undervalued even when working with adults and I always feel heard and valued.”

Opportunity for Improvement as Identified by Youth Leaders

Through their evaluations, Youth Leaders shared ideas for enhancing the EYE Model. They suggested creating more opportunities for interaction with each other and the community, more direct-action projects - like the Summer Arts Program - and ongoing engagement with the communities they serve. Youth also proposed ways to involve more participants, including a more accessible EYE YLT application process. They highlighted the need for additional resources, such as funding for meals and not just snacks, transportation, and training, to better support youth engagement.

Discussion

The EYE Model was envisioned to engage youth with lived experience in the design and delivery of prevention strategies and trainings to address youth substance use. Our findings suggest that by engaging Youth Leaders in this model and providing supports to participate fully, the Youth Leaders were able to develop social emotional skills, strengthen their mental health, decrease their personal intent/desire to use substances, increase connection to each other and their own communities, and, as a result, take direct action for prevention and impact the broader community. Through participation in this program, youth created authentic connections and opportunities, both for themselves and their communities. The knowledge skills and abilities gained by the Youth Leaders position them to navigate today's challenges and drive meaningful community engagement.

Creating space for young people with lived experience to identify root causes and cultivate collective healing through shared leadership has allowed for excellent outcomes. As highlighted numerous times by the youth in their experience evaluations and the focus group discussion, one of the most important aspects of EYE for Prevention has been building trust and centering relationships before focusing on projects or outcomes. This has helped establish a

strong foundation for the group's work. Another factor that contributed to the success is having a facilitator who has overcome adversity through their own lived experience, is devoted to the youth, is passionate about the work, has an extensive community network, and has strong mentorship skills, all of which greatly enhanced the positive outcomes of this work.

There are several limitations to the way in which this model was evaluated. These findings describe a specific model implemented in a specific place (Denver, Colorado) by a facilitator with lived experience, community connections, strong interpersonal skills, and notable ability to connect with youth. While these skillsets can be found among other facilitators of similar groups, the Youth Leaders' experience and the model are specific to this facilitator. Therefore, we cannot say if findings would be the same with a different facilitator or in a different location with access to different resources and communities. The success of this program as implemented highlights some of the key skills that could be beneficial for facilitators to possess. Additionally, there were changes in Youth Leader participation over time, which created participation gaps that could not be readily accounted for in analysis of the experience ratings. Also, the youth involved on the EYE YLT started out rating most if not all aspects of the experience evaluation highly. The timing of baseline survey administration is a possible contributing factor to this as many Youth Leaders completed the baseline 1-2 months after being onboarded, something we have and continue to work to address. Therefore, it is difficult to observe statistically significant growth in the areas assessed by the experience evaluation. Finally, there was inconsistent dialogue with the Youth Leaders around the experience ratings provided on the experience evaluations. Having more consistent and regular discussion with the Youth Leaders would have provided additional context when ratings declined or increased. This would likely further the success of this model.

Implications for practice

Though more youth engagement efforts include youth as co-researchers throughout projects, there is still a lack of full involvement in all aspects from decision making to implementation, particularly for youth with lived experience.⁴ The EYE for Prevention Youth Engagement Model is a unique model for youth engagement that could be modified and replicated in other communities for work that impacts young people's lives. Through a comprehensive evaluation of overall experience, attitudes and abilities, meetings supports, and youth-adult interactions we have outlined and described key components (a well-connected facilitator with lived experience, creating community and safe spaces, trust building, capacity building, and youth-led with shared decision making) that others can tailor and implement to amplify youth voice and provide young people with the space and tools to make a difference. Youth want to be considered and involved in work that impacts themselves, their peers, and their communities. As previous articles have demonstrated, when sharing leadership with Youth Leaders, the outcomes are wider reaching, more informative, and more meaningful.^{4,5,7} Our results and experience developing and implementing the EYE Model demonstrate that creating a space where true shared leadership can occur takes dedication and commitment. The EYE Model has demonstrated the power in youth-directed projects and evaluation. Authentic engagement of young people with lived experience with substance use is an approach that centers youth voice and allows for the integration of their unique expertise within programmatic work. This is critical to the design and delivery of relevant and effective approaches that elevate public health and evaluation practice for today and tomorrow.

Acknowledgements

Many individuals played an integral role in the work described above. This includes current and former EYE Youth Leaders (not all listed below have data included in this paper): Arianna LeDoux, Aariyah Johnson, Angel Amankwaaah, Axel Cano, Bri Manchego, Galilea Cano, Katia Morquecho, Megan Amasa, Meron Dawit, Mikaela Kevil, Nate Thalley, Sophie Hernandez, Stella Wagner, Yoel Mesfin, Rosa Gebremariam, Calypso Williams, Vishnu Gonzales, Alana Mendez, Amelia Fredrico, Isaiah Jiron, Khandi Vargas, Isabella Salazar. We would like to acknowledge Alex Limas for the role he played in helping to lay the foundation for this work in 2020 during COVID so it could launch and flourish with the current facilitator hired in 2021. Additionally, Emily Hecker with the Evaluation Center helped with drafting the updated experience evaluation for alignment across other youth engagement work at partner organizations in Colorado. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge that this project received funding from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Partnerships for Success- Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF) Grant Program.

References

1. High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data [Internet]. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [Cited 2024 October 31]. Available from: <http://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/>
2. Friedman J, Hadland SE. The Overdose Crisis among U.S. Adolescents. The New England Journal of Medicine [Internet]. 2024 [Cited 2024 October 31];390(2):97-100. doi: s10.1056/NEJMp2312084.
3. Community Engagement: An Essential Component of an Effective and Equitable Substance Use Prevention System [Internet]. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2022 [Cited 2024 October 31] Publication No.:

PEP22-06-01-005. Available From: <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep22-06-01-005.pdf>

4. Turuba R, Irving, S., Turnbull, H., Amarasekera, A., Howard, A. M., Brockmann, V., Tallon, C., Mathias, S., Henderson, J., & Barbic, S. Practical Considerations for Engaging Youth With Lived And/or Living Experience of Substance Use as Youth Advisors and Co-Researchers. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* [Internet]. 2022 [Cited 2024 October 31];3(3). doi: <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.38683>
5. Valdez, E. S., Skobic, I., Valdez, L., O Garcia, D., Korchmaros, J., Stevens, S., Sabo S., Carvajal, S. Youth Participatory Action Research for Youth Substance Use Prevention: A Systematic Review. *Substance Use & Misuse* [Internet]. 2019 Oct [Cited on 2025 May 6]; 55(2), 314–328. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10826084.2019.1668014>
6. Ballard, P.J., Kennedy, H.K., Collura, J.J., Vidrascu, E. Torres, C. Engaging youth as leaders and partners can improve substance use prevention: a call to action to support youth engagement practice and research. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy* [Internet]. 2023 Nov [Cited on 2025 May 6]; **18**, 71. Available From: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13011-023-00582-7>
7. Making the Wise Investment: Statewide Needs Assessment of Primary Prevention for Substance Abuse Final Report For The Colorado Office Of Behavioral Health. The Colorado Health Institute [Internet]. 2018 Feb [Cited on 2024 October 31]. Available from: https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/sites/default/files/file_attachments/Making%20the%20Wise%20Investment.pdf

8. POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT TOOL BOX]. Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment [Internet]. [cited 2024 September 5]. Available from: <https://sites.google.com/state.co.us/pydinaction/home>
9. Olivier J, Russell JL. Authentic youth engagement within organizations: What does it look like in practice. Chaplain Hall at the University of Chicago [Internet]. 2023 Sept [Cited on 2024 October 31]. Available From: https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Chapin-Hall_Authentic-Youth-Engagement-Study_Brief-Sept-2023-1.pdf
10. Madrigal DS, Salvatore A, Casillas G, Casillas C, Vera I, Eskenazi B, Minkler M. Health in my community: conducting and evaluating PhotoVoice as a tool to promote environmental health and leadership among Latino/a youth. Progress in Community Health Partnerships [Internet]. 2014 [Cited on 2024 September 5] ;8(3):317-29. doi: 10.1353/cpr.2014.0034. PubMed PMID: 25435558; PMCID: PMC4428619.
11. Davidson L. WCSD Social Emotional Competency Long-Form Assessment. Washoe County School District[Internet]. 2018 Jan [Cited September 5 2024]. Available from: <https://www.washoeschools.net/Page/10932>
12. Donna Jo McCloskey R, PhD, (Chair), Mary Anne McDonald, DrPH, MA, Jennifer Cook, MPH, Suzanne HeurtinRoberts, PhD, MSW, Stephen Updegrove, MD, MPH, Dana Sampson, MS, MBA, Sheila Gutter, PhD, Milton (Mickey) Eder, PhD. PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT. National Institutes of Health & Human Services [Internet]. 2011 [Cited on 2024 September 5]. NIH Publication no. 11-7782. Available From: https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/11699/cdc_11699_DS1.pdf

13. COLORADO'S YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM. Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment [Internet]. 2020 [Cited on 2024 September 5]. Available From:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1W6VVImbjl8d20JtErgxKjoBkoTDfkwUq/view>
14. Jones KR. Youth-Adult Partnerships: Are You There Yet? How to Evaluate your 4-H Youth Development Program. Cooperative Extension Service: University of Kentucky-College of Agriculture [Internet]. 2006 Feb [Cited on 2024 September 5]. Available from: <https://publications.ca.uky.edu/files/4mo05oo.pdf>

Table 1: Change in mean agreement from baseline to final participation timepoint in six knowledge, skill, and ability domains and Youth Engagement Continuum domain (N=18) during project period of April 2022- April 2024

Domain	Subdomain	Baseline	Final Timepoint
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
<i>Action and Self Efficacy</i> ⁺	I can work well with a group of other youth to organize a program or event at my school or within my community	4.83 (0.38)	4.67 (0.49)
	I can make a really difference in improving my city	4.33 (0.59)	4.50 (0.71)
	I can make a good presentation to youth at my school or in my community on an issue I care about	4.53 (0.51)	4.78 (0.43)
	I can make a good presentation to my teachers, principals, or community leaders on an issue that I care about	4.61 (0.61)	4.56 (0.70)
	I can develop a research tool that gathers useful information	4.06 (0.80)	4.50 (0.62)
	I can use research results to come up with realistic recommendations	4.29 (0.59)	4.56 (0.51)
<i>Socio-political skills</i> ⁺	I am often a leader in groups	4.33 (0.69)	4.28 (0.75)
	If I want to improve a problem in my city, I can work effectively with other youth on this issue	4.28 (0.89)	4.61 (0.61)
	I know how city rules and policies are made	3.17 (1.15)	3.83 (0.92)*
<i>Leadership Efficacy</i> ⁺	I am good at leading groups	4.22 (0.65)	4.33 (0.77)
	I am good at organizing people to get things done	4.11 (0.83)	4.44 (0.70)
	I am good at getting people to follow my ideas	4.11 (0.76)	4.28 (0.75)
<i>Motivation and Influence</i> ⁺	It is important for youth to try to improve our community or city even if we can't always make the changes we want	4.83 (0.38)	4.89 (0.32)
<i>Participatory Behavior</i> ⁺	I have made a presentation to a group of people I don't know	4.11 (0.96)	4.89 (0.32)*
	I have spoken with adults in my school or community about issues that I want to improve at the school or community	4.17 (0.99)	4.47 (0.87)*
	If issues come up that affect youth at my school or within my community, we do something about it	4.22 (0.73)	4.61 (0.61)*
<i>Social Emotional Skills</i> [^]	Knowing what my strengths are	4.11 (0.76)	4.11 (0.58)
	Knowing how to get better at things that are hard for me to do	3.94 (0.54)	4.11 (0.83)
	Knowing when I am wrong about something	3.67 (1.08)	3.94 (0.87)
	Knowing when I can't control something	3.61 (1.14)	3.50 (1.15)
	Knowing when my feelings are making it hard for me to focus	3.83 (1.15)	4.06 (1.06)
	Knowing the emotions I feel	4.00 (0.97)	4.33 (1.03)
	Knowing ways to make myself feel better when I'm sad	3.61 (1.04)	4.06 (1.06)
	Noticing what my body does when I am nervous	4.17 (0.92)	4.56 (0.78)
	Knowing when my mood affects how I treat others	4.33 (0.84)	4.39 (0.50)
	Knowing ways I calm myself down	4.11 (0.68)	4.17 (0.71)
	Learning from people with different opinions than me	4.33 (0.97)	4.06 (0.80)
	Knowing what people may be feeling by the look on their face	4.11 (0.83)	4.39 (0.85)
	Knowing when someone needs help	3.94 (0.94)	4.28 (1.13)
	Knowing how to get help when I'm having trouble with a peer	3.94 (0.87)	3.94 (1.16)
	Knowing how my actions impact my peers	4.33 (0.59)	4.29 (0.92)
<i>Youth Engagement Continuum</i> ^x		3.94 (1.21)	4.41 (0.80)

* Compared to baseline, this mean is statistically significantly different at an α of <0.05

⁺Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree; 5= Strongly Agree

[^]Scale: 1=Extremely Difficult; 5= Extremely Easy

^x Scale: 1= Outreach/ Service; 2= Consult; 3= Involve; 4= Collaborate; 5=Share Leadership

Table 2: Change in mean agreement from first measurement to final measurement in four youth-adult interaction domains (N=12) during project period of April 2022-April 2024

Domain	Subdomain	First Measurement	Final Measurement
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
<i>Impact of Participation on Wellbeing^a</i>	Attending meetings has helped with mental health	4.17 (0.79)	3.67 (0.98)
	Attending meetings has helped with not using substances	3.65 (1.50)	3.83 (1.03)
	Attending meetings has helped with feeling connected to others	4.61 (0.61)	4.17 (0.83)
<i>Youth Ratings^b</i>	Youth consistently take initiative working on projects	4.17 (0.86)	4.33 (0.65)
	Youth arrive to meetings/events on time	3.89 (0.83)	4.08 (0.51)
	Youth rely on themselves to make key decisions	3.89 (0.83)	4.08 (0.79)*
	Youth have full access to information that is needed to make decisions	4.33 (0.97)	4.5 (0.52)
	Youth always share ideas in meetings	4.72 (0.57)	4.67 (0.49)
	Youth support one another in meetings or project related activities	4.94 (0.24)	4.83 (0.39)
	Youth have an equal voice in decision-making processes	4.83 (0.38)	4.58 (0.67)
	Youth feel they belong in this program/organization	4.89 (0.32)	4.75 (0.45)
<i>Adult Ratings^b</i>	Adult staff provide direction and mentoring for youth	4.94 (0.24)	4.83 (0.39)
	Adult staff always actively include youth as team members in working on project activities	4.89 (0.32)	4.67 (0.65)
	Adult staff coach youth to come to their own conclusions	4.65 (0.7)	4.25 (0.97)
	Adult staff always take the ideas of youth seriously	4.83 (0.38)	4.75 (0.45)
	Adult staff routinely recognize youth for their accomplishments	4.76 (0.56)	4.67 (0.65)
	Adult staff always advocate for youth with other staff and partners	4.94 (0.24)	4.83 (0.39)
	Adult staff acknowledge and demonstrate their role as caring and supportive adults when interacting with youth	4.78 (0.43)	4.75 (0.45)
	Adult staff create the space for you to build upon your strengths, passions, and ideas	4.88 (0.33)	4.83 (0.39)
	Adult staff are considerate of other aspects of your life	4.89 (0.32)	4.83 (0.39)
<i>Youth-Adult Ratings^b</i>	Youth and adult staff get along well together	4.89 (0.32)	4.92 (0.29)
	Youth seem comfortable working with adult staff	5.00 (0.00)	4.67 (0.65)
	Adult staff seem comfortable working with youth	4.67 (0.59)	4.75 (0.45)
	Youth and adult staff work together as partners on project tasks	4.61 (0.78)	4.75 (0.45)
	Youth and adult staff learn a lot from one another	4.72 (0.46)	4.67 (0.65)
	Youth and adult staff frequently help one another develop new skills	4.28 (0.89)	4.58 (0.67)
	Youth and adult staff are respectful of each other	4.89 (0.32)	4.92 (0.29)
	There are opportunities for youth to connect and build strong relationships with other youth and adults	4.89 (0.32)	4.75 (0.45)

* Compared to baseline, this mean is statistically significantly different at an α of <0.05

^a Scale: 1= Not at all; 5= A great deal

^b Scale: 1= None of the time; 5= All of the time

Table 3: Themes associated with key topic areas derived from open-ended experience evaluation question responses (n=18) (April 2022 -April 2024), open-ended exit survey responses (n=4) (April 2022 -April 2024) and the focus group discussion (n=6) (October 2023)

Key Topic Area	Themes
<i>EYE Model</i>	● Selecting a facilitator through the lens of both identity and interaction ● Supportive caring staff ● Trust/ relationship building ● Shared leadership ● Mentorship ● Empowerment ● Opportunity for regular interaction ● Positive youth development ● Strengths based - youth are the experts ● Moving from and ally to an accomplice/advocate/protector ● Engage in continuous quality improvement ● Evolution of model
<i>Supports Provided</i>	● Trauma informed environment ● Accessibility ● How the work happens
<i>Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities</i>	● Overarching knowledge, skills, and abilities ● Action and self-efficacy ● Socio-political skills ● Leadership efficacy ● Motivation and influence ● Participatory behavior ● Social emotional skills
<i>Impact of Self: Mental Health, Substance Use and Connection to Peers and Community</i>	● Connection to self ● Connection to others ● Community where safe and heard
<i>Impact on Community</i>	● Lived experience and associated motivation ● Power of youth voice ● Resources shared ● Networking, connection, relationship building ● They have expanded ways they engage with the community ● Create change through direct action ● EYE youth leader now on staff
<i>Youth Engagement Continuum</i>	● This changed/evolved as we moved through the work ● Group united effort ● Youth led, shared leadership ● Co-created community ● Represent all voices in group ● Engaging community members ● Excellent engagement and diverse perspectives/voices ● Inclusive ● Only a few step up so more involvement
<i>Opportunity for Improvement as Identified by Youth Leaders</i>	● Create space for more interaction ● Increased resources for engagement ● More projects/ workshops ● More opportunity for direct action

- | | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• More ways to stay connected with community impacted by work |
|--|---|

Appendix 1

Baseline Experience Evaluation

This survey is intended to gather information on the skills you are developing and on your experience being a part of the EYE for Prevention Youth Leadership Team. We ask that you be open and honest about your experiences. The data presented from this survey will be aggregated and anonymized so your responses will not be tied back to you. We know your time is valuable and we thank you for taking the time to complete this survey so we can ensure that you are having the best experience possible.

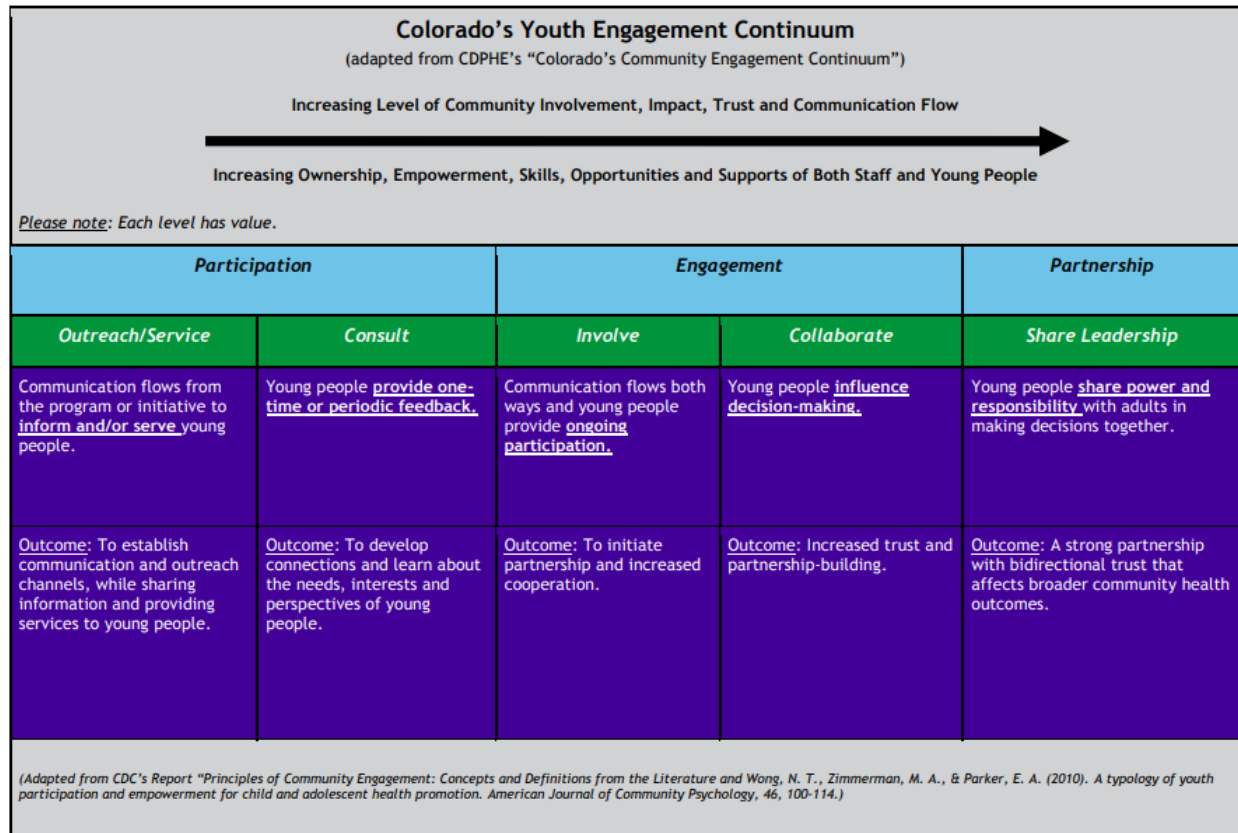
The following section asks you to reflect on your leadership, confidence, community/political engagement, and participatory behavior. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I can work well with a group of other youth to organize a program or event at my school or within my community.					
I can make a real difference in improving my city.					
I can make a good presentation to youth at my school or in my community on an issue I care about.					
I can make a good presentation to my teachers, principals, or community leaders on an issue that I care about.					
I can develop a research tool that gathers useful information.					
I can use research results to come up with realistic recommendations.					
I am often a leader in groups.					
If I want to improve a problem in my city, I can work effectively with other youth on this issue.					
I know how city rules and policies are made.					
I am good at leading groups.					
I am good at organizing people to get things done.					
I am good at getting other people to follow my ideas.					
It is important for youth to try to improve our community or city even if we can't always make the changes we want.					
I have made a presentation to a group of people I don't know.					
I have spoken with adults in my school or community about issues that I want to improve at the school or within the community.					
If issues come up that affect youth at my school or within my community, we do something about it.					

Please tell us how easy or difficult each of the following are for you:

	Extremely easy	Somewhat easy	Neither easy nor difficult	Somewhat difficult	Extremely difficult
Knowing what my strengths are					
Knowing how to get better at things that are hard for me to do					
Knowing when I am wrong about something					
Knowing when I can't control something					
Knowing when my feelings are making it hard for me to focus					
Knowing the emotions I feel					
Knowing ways to make myself feel better when I'm sad					
Noticing what my body does when I am nervous					
Knowing when my mood affects how I treat others					
Knowing ways I calm myself down					
Learning from people with different opinions than me					
Knowing what people may be feeling by the look on their face					
Knowing when someone needs help					
Knowing how to get help when I'm having trouble with a peer					
Knowing how my actions impact my peers					

Review the Colorado Youth Engagement Continuum. Think about working with The Public Health Institute at Denver Health and EYE for Prevention when answering this question.



Looking at the continuum, which level would you say The Public Health Institute at Denver Health is on in its youth engagement work and what made you select that level?

- ☐ Outreach/ Service
- ☐ Consult
- ☐ Involve
- ☐ Collaborate
- ☐ Share Leadership

Please explain why you placed The Public Health Institute at Denver Health where you did on the continuum?

Appendix 2

Ongoing 6-Month Experience Evaluation

This survey is intended to gather information on the skills you are developing and on your experience being a part of the EYE for Prevention Youth Leadership Team. We ask that you be open and honest about your experiences. The data presented from this survey will be grouped together and made anonymous so your responses will not be tied back to you. We know your time is valuable and we thank you for taking the time to complete this survey so we can ensure that you are having the best experience possible.

The following section asks you to reflect on your leadership, confidence, community/political engagement, and participatory behavior. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I can work well with a group of other youth to organize a program or event at my school or within my community.					
I can make a real difference in improving my city.					
I can make a good presentation to youth at my school or in my community on an issue I care about.					
I can make a good presentation to my teachers, principals, or community leaders on an issue that I care about.					
I can develop a research tool that gathers useful information.					
I can use research results to come up with realistic recommendations.					
I am often a leader in groups.					
If I want to improve a problem in my city, I can work effectively with other youth on this issue.					
I know how city rules and policies are made.					
I am good at leading groups.					
I am good at organizing people to get things done.					
I am good at getting other people to follow my ideas.					
It is important for youth to try to improve our community or city even if we can't always make the changes we want.					
I have made a presentation to a group of people I don't know.					
I have spoken with adults in my school or community about issues that I want to improve at the school or within the community.					
If issues come up that affect youth at my school or within my community, we do something about it.					

The purpose of this section is to allow you to share about your experience working with other youth and adult staff as part of EYE for Prevention.

Please rate where you feel the youth (including yourself) fall in regard to each statement:

	None of the time	Not very often	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
Youth consistently take initiative working on projects					
Youth arrive to meetings/events on time					
Youth rely on themselves to make key decisions					
Youth have full access to information that is needed to make decisions					
Youth always share ideas in meetings					
Youth support one another in meetings or project related activities					
Youth have an equal voice in decision-making processes					
Youth feel they belong in this program/organization					

Please answer the following questions based on you and your fellow youths' experiences working with the adult staff on this project:

	None of the time	Not very often	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
Adult staff provide direction and mentoring for youth					
Adult staff always actively include youth as team members in working on project activities					
Adult staff coach youth to come to their own conclusions					
Adult staff always take the ideas of youth seriously					
Adult staff routinely recognize youth for their accomplishments					
Adult staff always advocate for youth with other staff and partners					
Adult staff acknowledge and demonstrate their role as caring and supportive adults when interacting with youth					
Adult staff create the space for you to build upon your strengths, passions, and ideas					
Adult staff are considerate of other aspects of your life					

Please answer the following questions based on your experiences working with any or all of the adult staff and your perceptions of other youths' work with the adult staff:

	None of the time	Not very often	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
Youth and adult staff get along well					
Youth seem comfortable working with adult staff					
Adult staff seem comfortable working with youth					
Youth and adult staff work together as partners on project tasks					
Youth and adult staff learn a lot from one another					
Youth and adult staff frequently help one another develop new skills					
Youth and adult staff are respectful of each other					
There are opportunities for youth to connect and build strong relationships with other youth and adults					

Equity is achieved when everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from, has the opportunity to thrive and participate in all activities and decision-making. This requires eliminating barriers and providing the various supports needed to be able to fully participate.

What supports has The Public Health Institute at Denver Health provided so you are able to fully participate in the EYE for Prevention Leadership Team?

What else could The Public Health Institute at Denver Health do to allow you to be able to fully participate in the EYE for Prevention Leadership Team?

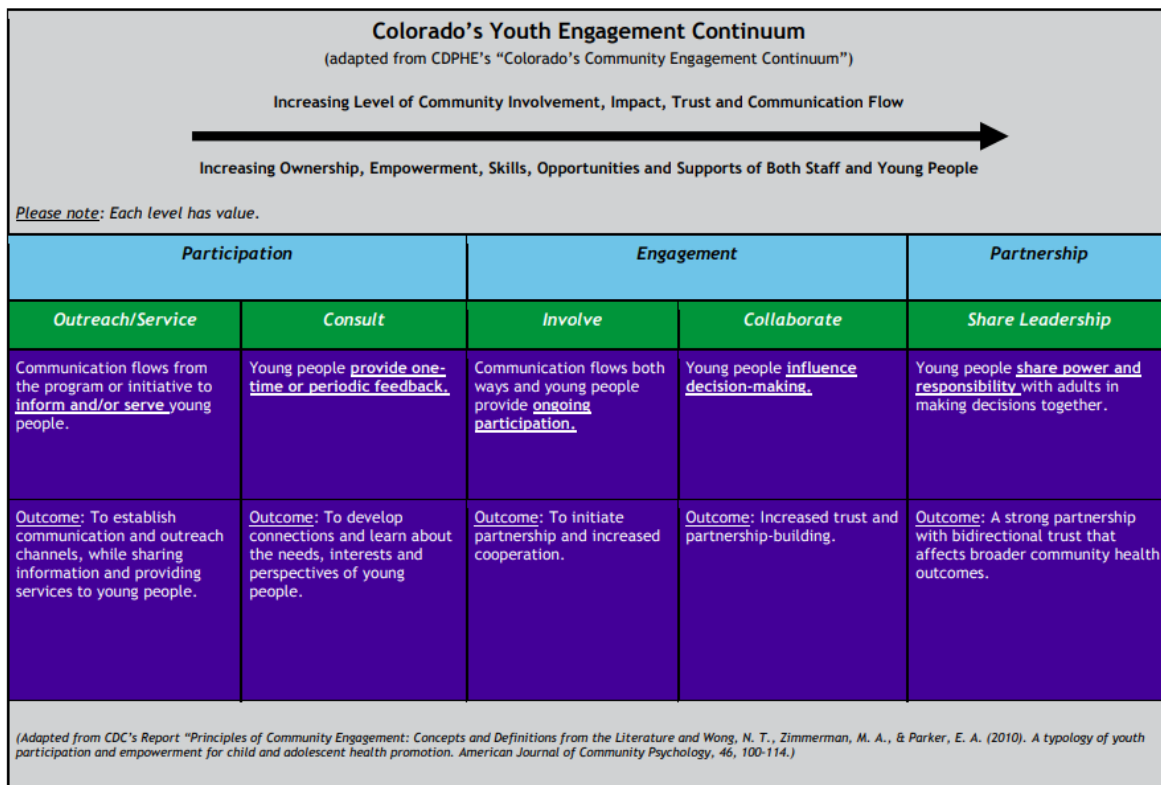
Please tell us how easy or difficult each of the following are for you:

	Extremely easy	Somewhat easy	Neither easy nor difficult	Somewhat difficult	Extremely difficult
Knowing what my strengths are					
Knowing how to get better at things that are hard for me to do					
Knowing when I am wrong about something					
Knowing when I can't control something					
Knowing when my feelings are making it hard for me to focus					
Knowing the emotions I feel					
Knowing ways to make myself feel better when I'm sad					
Noticing what my body does when I am nervous					
Knowing when my mood affects how I treat others					
Knowing ways I calm myself down					
Learning from people with different opinions than me					
Knowing what people may be feeling by the look on their face					
Knowing when someone needs help					
Knowing how to get help when I'm having trouble with a peer					
Knowing how my actions impact my peers					

Please rate how much participating in the bi-weekly EYE for Prevention Leadership Team meetings have helped you with the following:

	None at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
Your mental health					
Not using substances					
Feeling connected to others					

Review the Colorado Youth Engagement Continuum. Think about working with [Organization name] and EYE for Prevention when answering this question.



Looking at the continuum, which level would you say [Organization Name] is on in its youth engagement work and what made you select that level?

- ☐ Outreach/ Service
- ☐ Consult
- ☐ Involve
- ☐ Collaborate
- ☐ Share Leadership

Please explain why you placed [Organization Name] where you did on the continuum?

Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your experience on the EYE for Prevention Leadership Team to date?

Appendix 3

Exit Survey

This is an exit interview. It will assist us in understanding your experience as a youth leader and identify ways we can improve the experience for future youth leaders. We hope that you will be open and honest in your responses. Thank you for your time.

Why are you leaving the EYE for Prevention Youth Leadership Team?

Please describe what your overall experience has been participating on the leadership team.

What did you like most about being an EYE for Prevention Youth Leader?

What are three things we can do to improve the EYE for Prevention Youth Leader Experience?

What would you keep the same about the EYE for Prevention Youth Leader experience?

Would you recommend being an EYE for Prevention Youth Leader to a friend? Why or why not?

What are the top 3 things you are taking away from this experience? You can answer as broadly as you want.

How will you be able to apply those top 3 things you just mentioned to your life and work moving forward?

Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your experience being a part of the EYE for Prevention Youth Leadership Team?

Appendix 4

Focus Group Questions for Youth Leaders

We are interested in understanding more about your experience participating in the EYE for Prevention Youth Leadership Team to date. Today in our time together we will ask you all some questions to better understand your experience. There are no right or wrong answers and everyone might have both similar yet different experiences participating. We ask that you respect everyone's privacy and do not share outside this group what is shared. Everything shared today will be de-identified so you will remain anonymous. The information shared will help inform changes/ modifications to EYE for Prevention as well as inform publication on the EYE for Prevention Youth Engagement Model.

We will be recording today's discussion. If you are all ok with this, please raise your hands now. Thank you we will now get started.

1. What has been your overall experience been participating on the leadership team to date?
Please describe in as much detail as possible and you feel comfortable sharing.
2. What do you enjoy most about being a youth leader?
3. What are the top 3 items you would say you have learned participating in this experience?
4. How could you apply those items to your everyday life or future work?
5. What could we do to improve the EYE youth leader experience?
6. What would you keep the same about the EYE youth leader experience?
7. What motivates you to continue participating in the EYE Youth Leadership Team?
8. How have you grown as an individual since you started with the EYE Youth Leadership Team?
9. Is there anything else you want to make sure we know about your experience on the EYE Youth Leadership Team?