

Youth Engagement in Policy Profile: LA Youth Development Department

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Para Los Niños launched a Youth Advisory Council at both of their YouthSource Center sites as part of a city-wide Youth Advisory Council Pilot Program.

Executive Summary

In 2023, the City of Los Angeles' Youth Development Department (LA YDD) created a Youth Advisory Council Pilot Program in partnership with the city's 14 YouthSource Centers. YouthSource Centers are publicly funded to provide educational and career development programming to youth ages 16-24 to help them re-engage with school and/or work. Para Los Niños (PLN) is a community-based organization operating two YouthSource Centers, both of which created Youth Advisory Councils (YACs). This profile focuses on PLN's YACs. Each YAC operates differently, but all have shared goals of providing youth with opportunities to serve in leadership positions, providing insights on how to improve services, and advising on programmatic spending.

PLN's YACs are comprised of 10 YAC members. Each YAC elects youth leaders who partner with PLN staff to plan and facilitate monthly in-person YAC meetings. In their first year of operation, the YAC members created and fielded a survey to learn from youth in their communities about the barriers they face; from these surveys, mental health, housing, and employment emerged as top concerns. The YACs then prioritized action items to address those barriers and hosted community events such as workshops to educate youth about available resources. To support YAC members, PLN staff has created a supportive environment and provided training on topics such as communication and leadership. PLN has also tapped into its networks as a YouthSource Center to help YAC members connect with career opportunities and related supports and leveraged its relationship with YouthSource Center participants to recruit YAC members. PLN has benefited from the infrastructure and support provided by LA YDD to all YouthSource Centers, including recruitment materials and a training curriculum.

In year one, both of PLN's YACs have advanced important outcomes, both within PLN and among the YAC members. PLN has enhanced its YouthSource Centers' services based on YAC member feedback by creating more internships, expanding food and pregnancy resources, and hosting more youth-led programming. YAC members reflected that they have developed and practiced leadership, communication, and teamwork skills; gained a greater sense of self-efficacy; and made new connections with youth and adults in their communities. The broader community has also benefited from youth-led workshops and events. PLN and LA YDD hope to build on the early success of the YACs by building a leadership pipeline to connect youth with other opportunities across the city and increase partnership between the YACs and LA YDD.

Introduction

In recent years, policy advocates and decision makers have increasingly turned to young people with lived experience navigating youth-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, employment) to inform policy.^{i,ii} The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s Foster Youth and Opportunity Youth Initiatives (“Initiatives”) have prioritized grantmaking to organizations that engage young people in their policy efforts. Child Trends partnered with the Initiatives and five of their grantee organizations—including the Los Angeles Youth Development Department (LA YDD)—to explore the roles young people play in the policy process, factors that support or hinder authentic youth engagement, and the outcomes associated with authentic youth engagement. LA YDD identified one youth and one adult representative from Para Los Niños (PLN), a community organization that created Youth Advisory Councils, to serve on the Research Group, which met regularly throughout this project to participate in the design of the study, data analysis, and dissemination of findings (see Methodology and Data).

Child Trends built on existing frameworks^{iii,iv} to refine the Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework (Framework), which was adapted based on the experiences of the Research Group and findings from this study. The Framework details (1) the roles youth play in the policy process, (2) the stages at which youth are engaged, (3) how organizations support and empower youth, (4) local contextual factors that influence authentic youth engagement, and (5) how authentic youth engagement influences outcomes. This Framework guided data collection and analysis and may serve as a tool for readers to examine their own work and opportunities to expand and support authentic youth engagement in the policy process.

This brief applies the Framework to Para Los Niños’ experiences launching two Youth Advisory Councils at their YouthSource Centers in Los Angeles. Each section begins with a brief overview of the Framework; for a more detailed overview, see the [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#).

Definitions:

- **Youth or young people:** These terms are used interchangeably to refer to youth and young adults with lived experience navigating the child welfare, education, employment, and other youth-serving systems.
- **Authentic youth engagement:** Youth are active partners in shaping decisions, policies, and programs. They are empowered and valued as contributors, co-creators, and decision makers in their communities and intentionally supported in these roles.
- **Policy process:** Policy identification, formulation, advocacy, and implementation. This study focused on local and state policies, including legislative and administrative policies.

Design and implementation of the Youth Advisory Councils

In 2023, LA YDD created a YouthSource Advisory Council Pilot Program in partnership with the city’s 14 YouthSource Centers. YouthSource Centers are funded by the City of Los Angeles Economic & Workforce Development Department and provide programming to help Angelenos ages 16 to 24 who are not in school or working to graduate; pursue higher education; and find paid internships, skills training, and job readiness programs.¹ Each

This profile focuses on the following policy win: In 2024, Para los Niños launched a Youth Advisory Council at both of their YouthSource Center sites, with a total of 10 young people serving on the Council. The YACs were created to empower youth with leadership skills, confidence, and community connections while ensuring they have a voice in decision making. The goal was to engage youth and provide meaningful feedback to stakeholders across the city.

Youth Advisory Council (YAC) operates differently, but all have shared goals of providing young people with opportunities to be in leadership positions, provide insights on how to improve services, and advise on programmatic spending. LA YDD also provides support to each YouthSource Center to start their YAC in the form of training, a curriculum, guidance on how to recruit and select young people, and ongoing training and connection for staff supporting each YAC.

This profile explores the YAC model by focusing on the YACs led by one organization, [Para Los Niños](#) (PLN), that operates two YouthSource Centers: one in Westlake and one in Northeast Los Angeles. The focus of this policy win is on changing practices within YouthSource Center organizations and creating pathways to civic engagement for young people. To do so, we sought to learn how PLN's two YACs function and what outcomes were achieved in their first year in operation.



How Were Youth Involved?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

There are many different roles that youth may play in the policy process as they share their lived expertise. Their roles may continuously shift over time and depending on the activity. In this study, youth roles were organized into:

- **Speaking:** Adults lead policy change, and youth share their ideas and opinions for policy change
- **Co-designing:** Youth and adults partner to lead policy change
- **Designing:** Youth lead policy change and adults assist

Youth often start in speaking roles and with scaffolding, support, and intentional organizational shifts in leadership from adults to youth, move into co-design and design roles over time.^v

Youth may play these roles at different stages within the policy process, which we organized into four stages for the purposes of this study:

- **Policy identification:** Identifying the problem and gathering background information
- **Policy formulation:** Formulating policy solutions, including drafting policy
- **Policy advocacy:** Advocating for policy change through a variety of mechanisms such as building coalitions, educating decision makers, and building public awareness
- **Policy implementation:** Monitoring and supporting implementation of policy changes

In the example of the YAC model led by PLN, YAC members had roles that spanned speaking, co-designing, and designing. Because the intention of the YACs was for members to collaborate with adults and develop leadership skills, there are fewer examples of speaking than there are of co-designing and designing. One example that spans both co-designing and designing is that YAC members elect leaders such as a Chair, who is responsible for leading the monthly in-person meetings. YAC leadership engage in co-designing by receiving support from PLN staff to learn more about how leadership roles function, what their responsibilities are, and how that would work in the context of their YACs. Once leaders are elected, they play a design role by leading YAC meetings and moving their work forward.

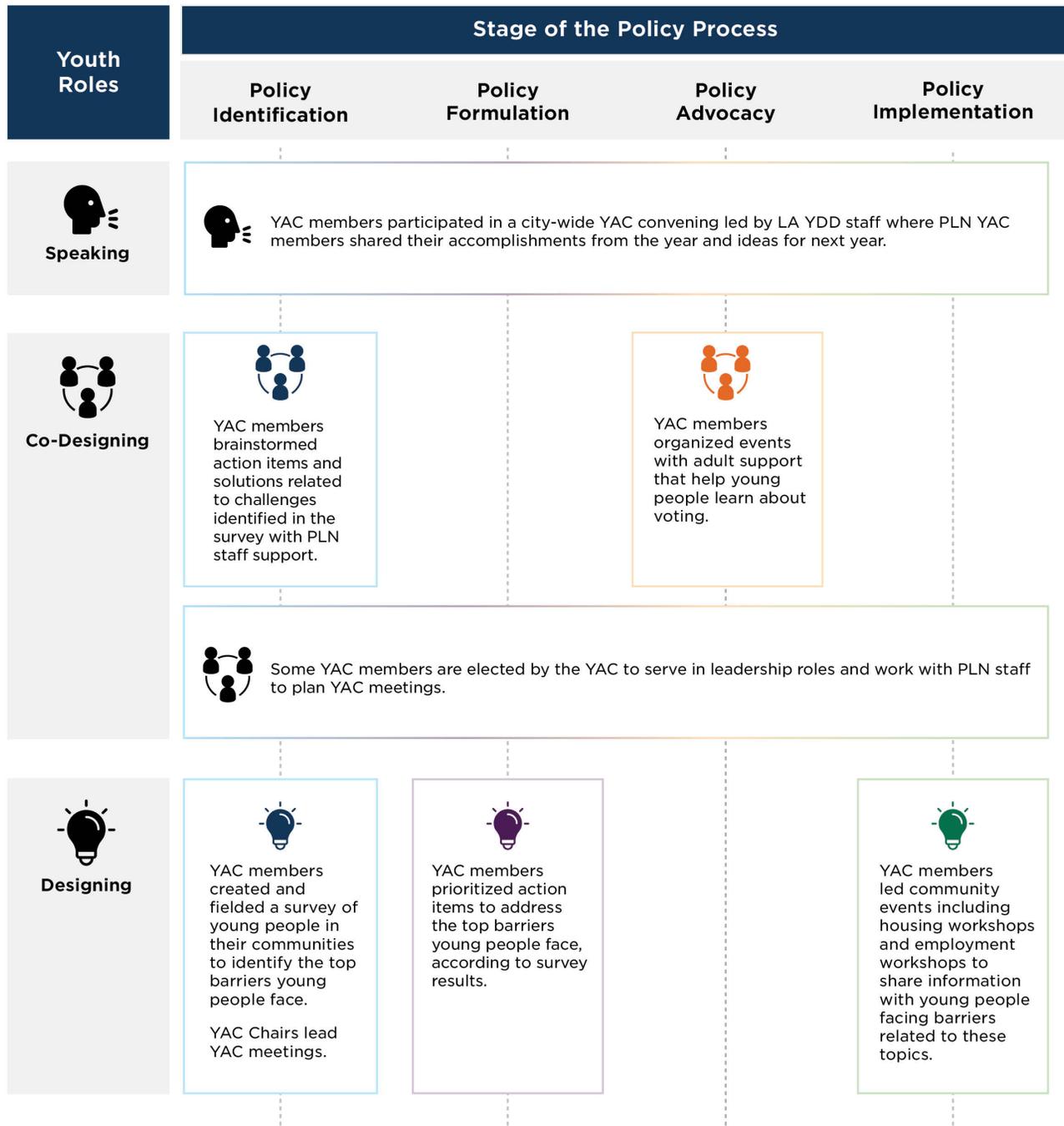
“Because we get really excited and we're young people, so we tend to like, go all over the place, so [staff] are over there just to help us... But for the most part, we are the ones that facilitate the meetings, were the ones that facilitate, like pretty much everything. Yeah, they are there just to support us in that sense.” -YAC member

YAC members were involved in all stages of the policy process. PLN's YACs began their work together with a survey to identify the top barriers and challenges young people face in their communities (e.g., housing, mental health, employment). YAC members began to formulate policy solutions to top barriers identified in the survey by brainstorming and prioritizing action items they could take. Policy advocacy efforts thus far have focused on organizing events that help young people in LA learn about how to vote and register to vote so their voices were heard in the 2024 election. Policy implementation efforts have included YAC members planning workshops to help youth understand what resources and supports are available for employment and housing, addressing two of the top barriers identified in their survey: employment and housing. See Figure 1 for examples of the roles and activities youth played in the first year of PLN's YACs.

“[We're] helping organize this sort of event, paired with multiple different YouthSource Centers. And I believe [Youth Council member] was the one sort of taking the lead on that. But it was finding out what [the event] would focus on...let's say, housing information. And then sort of figuring out how we could help set it up, what would be needed.” -YAC member

“We had a good turnout at Boyle Heights and so they had two representatives from UCLA, actually helped them fill out the form to register [to vote] right then and there. And then after that we had a virtual workshop...and they talked about the propositions.” -YAC member

Figure 1. Youth Roles and Activities on the YAC



How Were Youth Empowered and Supported?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

Organizations create environments that empower youth to engage in the policy process by implementing supportive structures and facilitating meaningful connections.

- **Structures** include:
 - **Centering youth** in the organization’s work by adopting specific frameworks (e.g., holistic well-being framework) or broader values related to shifting decision-making power and leadership to youth and viewing youth as experts.
 - Implementing **practices** that support authentic youth engagement, including recruitment strategies, regular meeting structures, mutual respect between adults and youth, safe spaces where youth feel comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences, flexible and accessible participation options, regular debriefing of youth experiences, and transparent communication.
 - Providing **resources** to youth, such as financial compensation and transportation to facilitate participation, connecting youth with external resources to meet their individual needs, training youth and adults, and equipping youth with data and information.
- **Connections** include:
 - **Peer support:** Youth foster an inclusive community, build relationships, and provide emotional support to one another when needed.
 - **Adult support:** Adults develop mentoring relationships with youth and connect youth with external resources to support their engagement.
 - **Connection to future benefits:** Youth have access to professional development opportunities such as internships and networking opportunities.

In PLN’s first year of the YAC, **adult support** and **future benefits** were the most common connections identified. Adult support captures how PLN staff have created an environment where YAC members feel supported but not led by them. These staff members included one person who was dedicated to the YAC in addition to other job responsibilities, and other staff members whose work and expertise align with the discussions and needs of the YAC. Examples of adult support include that PLN staff participated in YAC meetings (as opposed to leading them) and made connections in their network for YAC members. Future benefits capture the ways that PLN has built-in opportunities and support focused on the growth and success of YAC members beyond their time on the YAC.

“I have been able to network so much with all our different people, you know, make my own connections. And sometimes whenever I need support with something I’m like, “oh, I can probably go to this person or I can go probably to this nonprofit.” So, it’s definitely a great opportunity.” – **YAC member**

Youth training and recruitment were the most common structures identified. Youth training is focused on the learning and skill development that has happened throughout the first year of PLN’s YACs. Youth learned about managing meetings, leadership roles on councils, media, effective communication, and more. Recruitment refers to how young people learned about the YAC opportunities at PLN. The recruitment efforts for PLN’s YACs leveraged the strong relationships PLN staff had with the young people receiving support and services from PLN. All YAC members interviewed mentioned learning about the YAC opportunity from a case manager or advisor affiliated with PLN. For additional examples of PLN’s organizational strategies to support the YACs, see Figure 2.

"I went to this meeting in which we were tackling how to better communicate with one another so we could bring ideas and not try to like, make an argument about it, but come to an agreement." – **YAC member**

Figure 2. Organizational Strategies Used by PLN to Support the YACs

Structures		
Centering Youth	Practices	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YAC members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act as a voice, support, and guide for all PLN program participants. Create goals, with PLN staff, for the YACs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Successful recruitment due to PLN staff’s relationships with young people Meeting structures, such as in-person monthly YAC meetings Safe space for YAC members with an open-door policy and a recreation room Mutual respect among YAC members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training for YAC members Supportive resources, including services and programming, a monthly stipend, and food and transportation for in-person meetings
Connections		
Adult Support	Peer Support	Future Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PLN staff: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are participants in YAC meetings Leverage their networks to make connections to other adult supporters and leadership opportunities for YAC members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YAC members fostered strong, supportive relationships with each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YAC members will gain confidence to participate in City Council meetings YAC members are building a network YAC members find other leadership opportunities

While most of the organizational strategies uncovered through data collection help foster authentic youth engagement, PLN also faced challenges related to slow startup and limited funding. In the first year, PLN staff shared they felt the YAC was slow to start due to staffing challenges and that they might not have accomplished as much as other YouthSource Center YACs. They also had not yet braided together other funding sources outside of LA YDD to make this a sustainable effort, which is something PLN has been working on throughout the year.

What Local Factors Helped Youth Engagement?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

Local contextual factors include any characteristics of the local environment (e.g., political, geographical, historical) that help or hinder authentic youth engagement in the policy process. In this study, contextual factors were organized into five categories:

- **Stakeholder and partner engagement:** Stakeholders' and partners' receptivity to and engagement with youth
- **Political landscape:** The effect of local and/or state politics (e.g., majority political party's policy priorities) on youth engagement and state and local policies
- **History of youth engagement:** Historical and recent examples of youth engagement in the community
- **Philanthropic/private support:** Funder investments in youth engagement
- **Historical local and systemic inequities:** Inequitable access to supports and resources
- **Geography and infrastructure:** Physical landscape and infrastructure (e.g., transportation) available to support youth engagement

In implementing YACs at PLN, two local factors were most commonly mentioned: (1) infrastructure, and (2) historical local and systemic inequities.

Infrastructure refers to both the YAC model and the ongoing organizational support provided by YDD. YDD conducted trainings and shared resources, including recruitment materials and a curriculum, with each YouthSource Center. This helped ensure consistency across the YACs. Standard requirements for each YAC included selecting at least five youth to serve on the YAC, interviewing applicants using a provided list of questions, sharing interview notes and selections with LA YDD, and having at least one YAC meeting per quarter. PLN staff shared that they felt supported by YDD in implementing the YACs. PLN reviewed the curriculum with all YAC members and attended monthly virtual meetings with staff members from each YouthSource Center and YDD staff.

"[YDD] did a good job at meeting with us in person and really helping us understand why we're here, why we're doing what we're doing... So there was a lot of support from the city. And we had a once-a-month virtual meetings as well with the staff... and the city." -PLN staff

YAC members and PLN staff described several **historical local and system inequities** impacting their communities. There are many challenges that young people, including YAC members, face in the communities PLN serves and the YACs are striving to support, such as public school systems that do not

meet students' needs and high rates of homelessness in their communities. PLN's YouthSource Centers seek to address these historical inequities with a particular focus on youth who are not in school or working. Youth described joining the YACs to advocate for their communities' needs and raise awareness about available resources.

"In the community I live in...there's drugs, there's homelessness, there are many things you know, and not a lot of supplies...are available for us. So, I decided to join [the Youth Council] and advocate for what we need around my community." – YAC member

What Outcomes Did Youth Achieve?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

Authentic youth engagement in the policy process can lead to changes at the individual, organizational, community, and policy levels. This project focused specifically on organizational and policy outcomes; however, we share examples across all relevant levels:

- **Policy outcomes:** Administrative and/or legislative policy changes, and the intermediate steps that lead to these changes (e.g., increased decision maker awareness, new coalitions)
- **Community outcomes:** Changes within the community (e.g., how youth are engaged by other entities, shifting community narratives and mental models of youths' strengths and needs, and more equitable access to services)
- **Organizational outcomes:** Changes in how the organization engages youth
- **Youth outcomes:** Changes for individual youth (e.g., increased self-efficacy; skill development, including transferable skills; and sense of belonging)

Because LA YDD and PLN have only completed one year with the YACs, some of the outcomes identified are aspirational, and noted in Table 1 below. There is greater emphasis on organizational, youth, and community outcomes currently. Organizational outcomes are the result of PLN staff sharing power with young people and building a youth-centered culture. Youth outcomes are focused on building the capacity of YAC members to be leaders in the community. Policy outcomes are all aspirational and from the perspective of LA YDD rather than PLN or the YAC, though both YAC members and PLN staff share a desire to create change, such as reducing youth homelessness, improving youth mental health, and increasing employment rates that may lead to additional policy outcomes in the future.

Table 1. Outcomes of Authentic Youth Engagement

Outcomes	
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal funding (Aspirational). LA YDD hopes to have the YACs advocate for federal funding for workforce development. • Economic & Workforce Development Department collaboration. LA YDD has strengthened their partnership with the Economic & Workforce Development Department, including finalizing funding for the second year of the YAC model. This means YAC members will be able to continue influencing programming and resources to support youth across the city.

Outcomes	
Community Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops. Throughout the year, the PLN YACs have put on workshops for young people on the topics of housing and employment, two of the greatest barriers young people connected to PLN face according to the YAC survey. • Voter registration events. PLN YACs identified a need to educate young people on how to register to vote and how to vote, and then organized events with partners to provide this education. • Community events. YAC members planned events that provide training and education to young people in the community on topics such as voting, housing, and employment. • Youth leadership pipeline (Aspirational). There is a desire from LA YDD and PLN staff that the YAC model can create a pipeline of youth leadership opportunities across the city.
Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth-led programming. PLN events were more youth-led, from fun events like Lotería and karaoke hosted by young people to educational events on topics that are more relevant to young people (homelessness in particular). • Participation. Youth participation in programming has increased, as well as their engagement in activities outside of programming, such as completing the survey created by the YACs. • Responding to youth needs. In response to YAC member feedback, PLN has added and increased food and pregnancy resources available to young people and created more internships. • Youth leadership opportunities. Another department within PLN created a youth leadership group.
Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-efficacy. Over the course of the year, YAC members connected, sought leadership opportunities, and more actively shared their thoughts and opinions in YAC meetings. • Personal growth. YAC members shared that they have developed leadership, communication, public speaking, and teamwork skills. • Leadership. YAC members developed and practiced leadership skills; they have leadership opportunities within the Youth Council (e.g., Chair), they often forward opportunities for other youth to PLN staff, and they describe themselves as leaders. • Connections. Youth Council members seek out and work with other young people and organizations across the city, building their network.

“The main impact that we’re trying to make is just tackle as much as we can, and just inform youth, because information is power. And so the more information that you have the better you’ll do in life. And so another impact that it might have is that we’re trying to reduce youth homelessness.”
 – YAC member

As the second year of the YAC model continues, there is excitement and big plans for PLN’s YACs. Both YAC members and PLN staff share a desire to create change in their communities, such as reducing youth homelessness, improving youth mental health, and increasing employment rates that may lead to additional policy outcomes in the future.

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Appendix: Methodology and Data

This project was a community engaged research project – a collaborative approach to research that enables researchers and community members to develop and/or conduct research that is motivated by and meets the needs of a community. Child Trends conducted this project in partnership with a Research Group comprised of one youth representative and one adult representative from each of the five grantee organizations participating in the study, including LA Youth Development Department and Para Los Niños. Research Group members were paid consultants to Child Trends. Child Trends served as the research and technical assistance partner and convened the Research Group 10 times from July 2024 to June 2025 to participate in the design of the study, data analysis, and dissemination of findings.

Members of the Research Group identified this policy win and recruited their peers and partners to participate in interviews. This profile of LA YDD and PLN is informed by five interviews with a total of three PLN YAC members, two PLN staff, and one partner from LA YDD, supplemented with information gleaned from three documents. We coded all transcripts and documents in Dedoose and conducted thematic analysis with the Research Group to distill our findings and finalize a Framework for authentic youth engagement in the policy process. For more information on study’s methodology, please see <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/authentic-youth-engagement-policy-framework>.

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