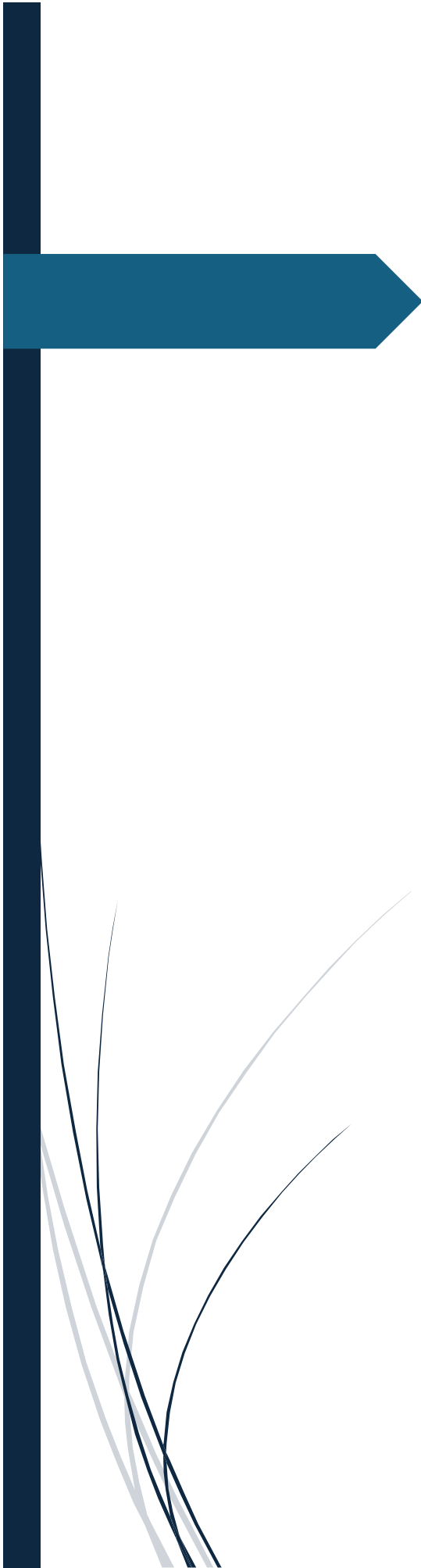




YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES (YLF)

THE CALIFORNIA MODEL



REVISED 2025

CALIFORNIA COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITIES (CCEPD)

I. BACKGROUND	2
II. CRITERIA FOR FORMAL AFFILIATION WITH THE YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM	3
III. GETTING STARTED	4
Funding the Forum	6
Site Selection and Dates	7
Selecting Student Delegates	8
Selection the Forum Staff	10
Finalizing the Program and Scheduling Presenters	11
Creating Small Groups	13
Organizing Transportation	14
Providing Support Services	15
Risk Management and Safety	16
IV. THE YLF PROGRAM	16
Creating an Exciting, Dynamic, and Memorable Experience	18
Orientation and Facilitator's Guide	19
The Delegate Workbook	19
Marketing and Outreach Materials	20
Acknowledgements	21
YLF Alumni Follow-up	21
Regional YLF/Alumni Events	22
Work Experiences	23
Program Evaluation	24

I. BACKGROUND

In 1992, the California Governor's Committee on Employment of Disabled Persons established the California Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities (YLF). The focus was on promoting employment for people with disabilities by inspiring and preparing disabled youth. The goal was to develop their leadership skills to help them overcome barriers to employment and social participation as adults. This initiative was driven by the success of "mainstreaming" and "full inclusion," which encouraged youth to fit in but often overlooked their unique experiences.

The vision was to create an annual statewide training for high school juniors and seniors with disabilities to:

- Emphasize their right and responsibility to pursue meaningful employment.
- Expose them to successful role models and encourage ambitious academic and career goals.
- Provide skills and resources to help them achieve their goals.
- Motivate them to be active in their communities and advocate for others with disabilities.
- Teach them about the cultural history and civil rights struggles of people with disabilities, including the ADA.
- Offer an intensive forum focused on leadership, independence, and goal setting.

The success of the forum was driven by the dedication of volunteer members and staff from the California Governor's Committee, particularly Dr. Janice Emerzian, Dr. Paul K. Miller, Harry Servidio, Catherine Kelly Baird, Chuck Kassis, and Hope Yasui. Tom Nagle, former Director of California's Employment Development Department, played a crucial role in supporting the project. The Chicano/Latino Youth Leadership Project and the Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership Foundation provided valuable guidance during the forum's development. Expansion beyond California was made possible through the support of Tony Coelho, John Lancaster, and Maggie Roffee from the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities.

Special recognition was given to Denise Bissonnette, Kris Lange, and Catherine Kelly Baird for their contributions to the YLF curriculum. Kris Lange and Catherine Kelly Baird were responsible for the first "How To" manual in 1998, with an updated version in 2002 reflecting input from YLF partner states.

The founding California Governor's Committee's staff, including Charlie Kaplan, Hope Yasui, Pam Porteous-Hunt, Shayn Anderson, Doug Gordy, Danny Gounder, Debbie Otto, Kim Carey, Regina Wallace, and Ryan Nagle, were also acknowledged for their commitment, which contributed to YLF's early success.

Today, the California model of the YLF is continued by the California Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (CCEPD).

II. CRITERIA FOR FORMAL AFFILIATION WITH THE YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM

The YLF model has proven to be extremely successful as a teaching model for young people with disabilities. In the late 1990s The California Governor's Committee and national partner, the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, strongly supported replicating it in other states, territories and nations.

However, a new YLF must maintain the integrity of the original California Model YLF to be allowed formal affiliation and use of the name "Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities (YLF)." We developed these criteria for affiliation in 1998, and they are still required for all YLF projects today.

Friends of Californians with Disabilities, Inc., is the exclusive legal author of the "California Model Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities (YLF)" and maintains all rights regarding maintenance of the curriculum and replication of this manual.

The following are requisites for any affiliated YLF:

- Students must be enrolled in an educational program that meets the state standards of secondary education, typically high school sophomores, juniors, and graduating seniors.

- Students with every kind of disability are invited to participate.
- Every student participant (delegate) must have a disability and have demonstrated potential to be a leader.
- To the extent possible, delegates should represent a diverse background and experience of students including but not limited to gender and gender expression, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, city and rural counties, and traditional and non-tradition school settings.
- Presenters/Speakers/Trainers that meet with the delegates should have a disability or lived experiences with disability. The overall goal is positive representation of disability through presenting role models to young delegates.
- It should be a goal that more than 75% of the volunteer staff are people with disabilities with efforts to include alumni in all staff positions.
- All volunteer staff must understand and support the concept of disability culture including self-determination, self-advocacy and disability pride.
- All volunteer staff must understand and support the concept of “self-determination” in encouraging the student delegates to establish their own personal and vocational goals.
- The California Model YLF written curriculum must provide the primary training components of any replicated project. However, the curriculum components may be modified or abbreviated to accommodate schedule requirements and/or the unique characteristics of a state, territory or community.
- Any group planning to produce a YLF must notify the California Committee of their intention and must request, in writing, recognition of their affiliation as a YLF.

III. GETTING STARTED

Drawing from our experiences in California, we’ve put together a set of recommendations to help you get started, including a checklist and timeline in the Appendix.

Start by forming a team to act as the YLF Core Planning or Governance Committee. This group will work alongside a YLF Project Manager to oversee the event. We suggest having around fifteen members, each capable of leading a smaller committee or subcommittee to handle specific aspects of the planning process. You'll find details for suggested subcommittees and checklists in the Appendix.

This core group should represent a diverse cross-section of the community, including individuals from the disability community, employers who support the forum, service providers, advocates, educators, and YLF alumni. It's essential to include individuals from a range of ages, including older adults and young adults in their early twenties, to better connect with the experiences of the youth attending the forum. Much like the delegates and volunteer staff, your Core Planning or Governance Committee should be diverse, reflecting a variety of disabilities and lived experiences.

In California, the YLF is coordinated by the CCEPD, with a designated YLF Project Manager overseeing all aspects of the event. The Chair of our YLF Governance Committee is also the Chair of CCEPD's Youth Subcommittee. While our forum benefits from the support of paid CCEPD staff and the YLF Project Manager, many Youth Leadership Forums may start without paid staff. In such cases, it's advisable to choose a Chair who can also provide some staff support. A strong Chair is crucial to the success of the project. They should be dedicated to the forum's goals, possess strong diplomatic skills to build consensus, and work to present the forum in an engaging and positive way.

Typically, your first forum will take place about two years after the initial planning meeting. This allows ample time for recruiting volunteers, securing funding, choosing a venue, organizing the program, and selecting delegates.

Following the first event, the YLF Core Planning or Governance Committee should meet monthly to assess the forum's success and plan for the next one. As the project evolves, alumni of the YLF will play an increasingly significant role, and the ultimate goal is for the forum to be led by its alumni—individuals who have emerged as leaders through their participation in the YLF itself.

Funding the Forum

There are various ways to fund a Youth Leadership Forum, and one of the key strategies is to secure donations of goods and services, as well as recruit volunteers for on-site staff positions.

For context, our six-day, five-night forum has an annual budget of \$300,000, covering 60 student delegates and 40 on-site staff members. The average cost per delegate is \$5,000, which includes expenses such as college dormitory usage, meals, personal attendant care, interpreter services, audio-visual equipment rental, and transportation.

Initially, our forum relied heavily on private-sector companies that supported our mission. Over time, we established a fee-for-service agreement with the State Department of Rehabilitation, which covered expenses for delegates who were clients of the department. Currently, the California YLF is funded through a public-private partnership, with contributions from the California Department of Rehabilitation, the California Department of Education, the California Workforce Development Board, the Department of Social Services, the Department of Developmental Services, Anthem Blue Cross, Sutter Health, Molina Healthcare, and others. Additionally, the California Employment Development Department continues to support the YLF through its support of the CCEPD contract.

To request financial support, we recommend preparing a briefing packet. This packet should include details about your sponsoring organization, an overview of the forum, a one-page projected budget, and clear instructions on how potential donors can get involved and contribute.

While grants may also be a viable funding option, it's crucial to determine who will be responsible for applying for and managing these funds. We also strongly suggest actively seeking donations of goods and services, particularly major items such as transportation and facility usage.

When requesting funding, it can be beneficial to include an alumnus who can speak about their experience at the forum. Personal testimonials can be a compelling way to demonstrate the value of the event.

Finally, as your forum becomes more established, you'll likely see an increase in donation sources and a decrease in funding needs. Over time, you'll build a committed core of volunteers and access additional resources beyond the initial startup costs.

Site Selection and Dates

Selecting the date and location for your forum is a critical first step, and it should be done at least a year in advance to allow ample time for delegate recruitment and other necessary preparations.

About a year before your event, choose your venue and finalize the contract. While some youth programs are held in hotels, we strongly recommend holding your forum on a college or university campus. The campus environment provides positive educational, social, and recreational experiences that inspire delegates to set ambitious academic goals. Additionally, hosting the forum near your state capitol and incorporating activities in government offices—such as those associated with the governor and legislature—reinforces the idea that delegates are full citizens who can actively engage in social and political matters.

When selecting a site for around 60 student delegates, you'll likely need the following:

- **Dormitory or sleeping rooms** for about 100 people (60 delegates and 40 staff members), typically in double-occupancy rooms.
- **A large meeting room** to accommodate approximately 125 people for large group sessions.
- **Six small meeting rooms** for smaller group sessions, each with space for 10 delegates and up to five staff members.
- **An adjacent dining area**, ideally a college cafeteria, where all meals can be served.
- **A social area** for delegates to relax during free time. (For example, we use the large-group session area, which features a pool table, ping-pong table, and music system.)
- **A banquet room** to host a formal lunch for approximately 250 people during the networking luncheon.

If delegates will be visiting your state capitol, it's essential to secure permits and arrange space both inside and outside the building for speakers and presenters.

Above all, make sure that the selected venue complies with accessibility standards under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to ensure full inclusivity for all participants. Selecting the date and site for your forum is a crucial first step and should be done at least a year in advance to allow time for delegate recruitment and other preparations.

Selecting Student Delegates

Selecting the right students to attend your Youth Leadership Forum is essential to its success. It's important to emphasize that the forum should focus on leadership development, not just personal enrichment for young people with disabilities. For the forum to have the greatest social impact, the delegates chosen should have demonstrated leadership qualities, especially the desire and ability to share the inspiration and knowledge they gain from the forum with other young people with disabilities who cannot attend. The overall success of the forum depends heavily on the careful selection of delegates.

While other statewide leadership conferences may have up to one hundred participants, we believe that a slightly smaller group is ideal for ensuring that everyone actively participates and benefits fully from the forum, particularly given the support needs of many delegates.

After refining our delegate recruitment and selection process over the past thirty years, we recommend starting by creating a user-friendly online application form. This form should be distributed to every public and private high school in your state or territory, as well as to advocacy organizations, individuals, and groups who might know potential candidates. This could include Regional Centers, Centers for Independent Living, and Vocational Rehabilitation Organizations.

From our experience, it's important to make the delegate application available well in advance of the forum, typically in the fall and winter months leading up to the event. The application period should close by early March, leaving sufficient time to finalize the selection before the forum takes place in the second week of July. This timeline provides flexibility to extend the deadline by a few weeks, which many applicants tend to request.

Once the application deadline has passed, the Student Selection Committee, composed of members from the Governance Committee and other community advocates, reviews the applications to ensure they meet the forum's criteria. These criteria include academic achievement, involvement in extracurricular activities, demonstrated leadership potential, and the ability to become a leader in both the broader community and the disability community.

After reviewing the applications, all applicants are interviewed virtually by members of the Student Selection Committee. We've found that these interviews are a critical part of the selection process. Sometimes, the application content can be misleading because well-intentioned family members, counselors, or educators may overly assist students in completing their applications (especially the essay portions). These interviews help clarify the true potential of each candidate, revealing whether they have the qualities needed to succeed as a delegate.

Once the interviews are completed, the committee meets to make the final decision on the 60 delegates who will attend the forum. The committee maintains final decision authority to ensure the selected group represents the diversity of disabilities and other aspects of the community.

The final selection of delegates takes place in early May, with selected delegates notified of their acceptance and all remaining applicants placed on a "waitlist" in case any of the selected delegates are unable to attend. The timing of the notifications allows for selected delegates to be recognized during their school's awards ceremonies.

All selected delegates must complete mandatory forms, including medical and accommodation details, travel arrangements, dietary and allergy restrictions, t-shirt sizes, emergency contact information, and

acknowledgment of the forum's Risk Management Policies, which cover Delegate Responsibilities and Rules of Behavior. Additionally, delegates are required to sign a press liability release form.

Selection the Forum Staff

Our forum relies on a mix of contracted professionals and dedicated volunteers to ensure its success. While individuals like our Nurse, American Sign Language Interpreters, Text Captioners, Travel Coordinator, Reasonable Accommodation Coordinator, Personal Care Attendants, and CCEPD staff are paid for their services, the event would not be possible without the active participation of many volunteers. This includes YLF alumni and other community members who generously give their time and energy to support the program. In recent years, we've been fortunate to offer small stipends as a token of appreciation for their efforts. The overall staff organization is overseen by the YLF Governance Committee Chair, the CCEPD Chair, and the YLF Project Manager.

From a staffing perspective, the most critical volunteer positions are those working directly on-site throughout the entire six-day forum. These individuals play a key role in shaping the delegates' experience. It's important that the on-site staff reflect the diversity of your state or territory, and that they are individuals who understand and model the principles the forum promotes. Ideally, your staff should be:

- People with disabilities or those closely affiliated with the disability community
- Individuals who have achieved a professional level in their respective fields
- Those who have demonstrated leadership abilities
- Individuals with positive attitudes who enjoy working with young people
- People with excellent communication skills

We particularly look for these qualities in individuals filling critical positions such as Emcees, Co-Counselors, Peer Mentors, and Group Assistants. These roles are most effective when the same individuals serve for multiple years.

As your program grows, it's important to involve an increasing number of YLF alumni as volunteer staff.

The participants are divided into six small groups, each made up of ten student delegates and supported by two Co-Counselors, one to two Peer Mentors, and at least one Group Assistant. Co-Counselors are responsible for leading small group discussions and reinforcing the forum's objectives. At least one of the Co-Counselors must have a disability. Peer Mentors are typically young people, either the same age as or older than the delegates, who can relate to the students and provide guidance on personal and social challenges they will soon face. Group Assistants help Co-Counselors with tasks such as assisting delegates with writing assignments, posting signs, and helping with meal trays.

As emphasized earlier, the most important factor when selecting staff is finding individuals who not only understand but also model the principles of the forum. It's essential to have volunteers who are positive, enthusiastic, and truly enjoy spending time with young people.

All volunteer staff positions require a staff application form. However, recruitment is generally conducted within a network of volunteers already familiar with the forum, rather than through widespread recruitment efforts.

Finalizing the Program and Scheduling Presenters

The YLF program is described in detail in the sample program included in this manual's Appendix, titled "Delegate Workbook." It is also covered later in the manual. Below is a brief overview of the program to help you plan the schedule for your presenters. The YLF program includes an overarching theme that represents the forum's main goal, as well as daily themes that highlight the focus and activities for each day. These themes have evolved since the first YLF manual was created in 1998, with input from colleagues now producing YLFs in other states and territories. You are encouraged to select the modules that best suit your state or community, keeping in mind that some modules are optional, while others are considered essential to the YLF experience.

Primary Program Concepts

Appreciate: Delegates will gain an appreciation for the history of disability by learning about landmark legislation and the experiences of people with disabilities.

Understand: Delegates will explore basic principles of leadership development and begin building tools for self-advocacy and independence.

Believe: Delegates will develop confidence in their future success by learning about services and programs that can help them achieve their goals, and by creating a leadership plan for their future.

Impact: Delegates will establish a community of support and mentors, not only to help achieve their personal goals but also to set goals that can positively affect the larger disability community and the future of people with disabilities.

Daily Themes

- Day 1 – Welcome Youth Leaders
- Day 2 – Learning about Disability History, Culture, and Community
- Day 3 – Discovering Resources to Reach Our Goals
- Day 4 – Living Independently
- Day 5 – Engaging in Our Communities
- Day 6 – Leading On

Once your schedule is finalized, you can begin inviting presenters. In keeping with the forum's philosophy, all presenters should be individuals with disabilities who can serve as role models for the student delegates.

It's important to have backup presenters in mind for each session, as cancellations can and do happen. Additionally, having staff available on-site to step in as backup presenters is helpful—especially if they are YLF alumni. From experience, we've learned to only invite presenters who have a history of being able to relate to young people. While some excellent speakers are great with older adults, they may struggle to engage young people for extended periods. YLF alumni, especially older ones, can make excellent speakers, particularly for your Mentors Luncheon.

We also recommend not scheduling sessions that are too long or lack interactive elements or audio-visual aids. Engaging presentations help maintain interest and involvement. With the rise of virtual presentations, you now have the opportunity to invite speakers from outside your state or territory, which can help keep speaker fees lower by reducing travel costs.

Creating Small Groups

As previously mentioned, delegates are assigned to small groups that meet regularly throughout the forum to discuss the topics covered in large-group sessions and work on related workbook exercises. In California, with 60 delegates, we divide them into six groups of ten delegates each, along with staff. Communication among delegates is a vital component of the program, as many of the participants have never had the opportunity to openly discuss their disability experiences with other young people. To encourage this exchange, we suggest that Co-Counselors create a space for lively and meaningful discussions, even if it means some workbook exercises aren't fully completed.

We recommend giving Co-Counselors flexibility in managing their small-group meetings to address the specific needs of their group. Sometimes, this flexibility might involve focusing more on conversation and less on completing the workbook activities.

When assigning delegates to groups, it is important to consider a variety of factors that may influence how students interact. Promoting diversity and inclusivity should be a priority, so try to ensure that each group represents a broad range of genders, ethnicities, and disabilities. However, given that communication is a key element of the program and resources can sometimes be limited, we have found it helpful to cluster students and staff who require American Sign Language Interpreters or Text Captioning together in the same group. This ensures that they can communicate more effectively with one another.

It's also crucial to avoid allowing drop-in visitors to observe small-group sessions. These unplanned interruptions can disrupt the quality and intimacy of these important discussions.

In recent years, we've introduced the role of **Small Group Facilitators**. These individuals act as advisors to the small groups and help staff manage facilitation, group dynamics, and delegate interactions. Small Group Facilitators are typically our most senior Co-Counselors, who possess a deep understanding of the program and are skilled in facilitating small-group discussions. If your forum is just starting, it's important to recruit individuals with leadership and facilitation experience. Former or current trainers, teachers, or educators often make excellent Small Group Facilitators.

Organizing Transportation

As outlined in the Transportation Coordinator checklist in the appendix, organizing transportation for delegates to and from the forum, as well as to offsite activities, is a significant task. If done effectively, transportation can have a lasting impact on the program's objectives. For many delegates, especially those who have never traveled far from home—particularly on their own—this experience can have a positive influence on their aspirations for education, career, recreation, and social involvement.

Given these important implications, we have learned several key lessons about transportation logistics. Proper planning is crucial, and the Transportation Coordinator must be meticulous, organized, and involved throughout the entire process, from planning to addressing any issues that arise during the forum itself.

We highly recommend designating one travel agency or airline to become familiar with the forum's specific needs. This agency will handle all travel arrangements for delegates, staff, and presenters, ensuring a streamlined process. In our experience, it works best to make the student delegates responsible for getting themselves to their local transportation terminals (airport, train depot, or bus terminal).

Once delegates arrive in Sacramento, where the forum takes place, we take over responsibility for them. Volunteers assist in transporting delegates between Sacramento's terminals and the forum site. This involves using accessible buses, and having staff like sign language interpreters, personal care assistants, and other volunteers to assist as needed. Volunteers greet the delegates at the terminals, recognize them by their forum T-shirts, help with luggage, supervise waiting times, and escort them to the buses. We've found that wheelchair-accessible buses are generally sufficient in capacity to accommodate all delegates, regardless of mobility limitations.

If your forum includes offsite activities like a visit to your state capitol, be sure to account for the time it will take to load and unload passengers who use wheelchairs. This is an important consideration in your overall schedule.

It's worth noting that some YLF programs in other states and territories manage transportation differently. In those programs, responsibility for transportation may only begin once the delegates arrive at the YLF site, with families or guardians being responsible for getting the students to and from the site. However, we suggest you carefully consider transportation options to avoid excluding students who may have limited access to transportation.

For follow-up sessions with YLF alumni, it might be more reasonable to require the alumni to arrange their own transportation, especially since they may be over 18 by that time and more independent. However, this decision should be based on the specific needs of your program.

Providing Support Services

At YLF, we believe that all students should have equal access to participate, regardless of their need for support services. Our program offers interpreters for deaf students, personal care attendants, real-time text captions, and communication facilitators—all at no cost to the delegates. We also recognize the importance of mental health services in ensuring a successful YLF experience.

A key component of our curriculum is helping students develop the skills needed to make independent choices. As part of this, we do not permit students to bring their own interpreters or personal care attendants. YLF provides an opportunity for students to work with other assistants, teaching them how to effectively communicate their needs and navigate the adult world. For similar reasons, we generally do not allow family members to take on support roles, though exceptions may be made in rare cases for students with very specific needs.

Risk Management and Safety

A copy of the California Risk Management Plan is included in the appendix. We strongly recommend that you consult with an attorney or legal representative to obtain the appropriate insurance coverage before hosting your forum, especially if you are not covered under an existing partner's umbrella. Many colleges and universities require additional insurance provisions for programs involving minors, which may include background checks and other mandated reporting requirements. These factors should be considered when creating your risk management plan to ensure the safety and protection of your student delegates.

IV. THE YLF PROGRAM

The California model YLF curriculum is structured around daily themes and core concepts, each of which is vital to the success of the YLF experience. We understand that each state, territory, or community may face different constraints—such as time, location, and budget—so you may need to adapt your approach to teaching these themes accordingly.

It is essential to remember that only learning modules that support the YLF disability culture and leadership philosophy should be included. If the forum shifts primarily to a recreational activity, it moves too far away from the core purpose of YLF. However, if the forum successfully integrates new components that meet the specific needs of the communities you serve, it may evolve into an even better version of YLF than originally planned.

In the Appendix of this manual, you will find a detailed description of the YLF program, along with a copy of the "Delegate Workbook." Following the workbook, there is a "Facilitators' Guide to the Delegate Workbook."

The themes outlined below represent the key messages for each day, along with potential activities for small groups, large group panels, and keynote speakers.

Day 1 – Welcome Youth Leaders

The Welcome Session sets the tone for the program and outlines the YLF process, providing an overview of leadership principles. These will be further discussed in small group sessions and reinforced through the delegates' "Personal Leadership Goal Planning."

Day 2 – Learning about Disability History, Culture, and Community

This day introduces students to the concept of disability culture, the history of disability advocacy, and relevant legislation. A session also focuses on how to discuss disability and share personal experiences

Day 3 – Discovering Resources to Reach Our Goals

The Technology and Resources to Reach My Goals session includes demonstrations of assistive technology. Other sessions provide information on resources and services such as the Department of Rehabilitation, Independent Living Centers, the Social Security Administration/S.S.I., and College and University Disability Resource Services. The Mentoring Luncheon introduces students to the concept of mentorship, emphasizing the importance of finding mentors to help them achieve their goals.

Day 4 – Living Independently

A panel of guests with different disabilities and diverse careers will discuss living successful, independent lives. This session provides students with insights into independent living, even if they are still living at home, and covers the concepts of institutionalization and the independent living movement.

Day 5 – Engaging in Our Communities

Speakers with disabilities who are involved in political action and advocacy will share their experiences. Students will also have the opportunity to visit the State Capitol and engage with the State Legislature. Many states have developed impactful Capitol visits, which include meetings with legislators and debates on current policy issues.

Day 6 – Leading On

The final session is a graduation and closing ceremony, serving as a culmination of all the concepts covered throughout the week. Delegates will have the opportunity to share their leadership plans and discuss how they will implement them in their communities. This theme is inspired by the well-known quote from Justin Dart, the "Godfather of the ADA": "I love you, Lead On."

Creating an Exciting, Dynamic, and Memorable Experience

While it's an informal aspect of YLF, creating a positive and enthusiastic atmosphere is essential, and we cannot stress enough how important this is. We employ several strategies to foster this environment.

First and foremost, all scheduled presenters must be individuals who can communicate their passion and energy effectively. While many presenters may excel with adult audiences, it's crucial that they can connect with and engage young people. A presenter who lacks enthusiasm may not resonate with the delegates.

We also utilize a "spirit squad" made up of our Group Assistants and Logistics Assistants, who prepare spirit cheers to energize the group at the start of each large group session. These cheers not only help set the tone but also serve as a time-keeping tool to signal the start of the session. It's important to be inclusive, especially when engaging students who are deaf. For example, a typical cheer we use is, "We've got spirit, yes, we do. We make a difference, how about you!" We ensure that all delegates are involved, incorporating clapping or stomping to include deaf students.

Music is another tool we use to maintain an upbeat atmosphere. We play music between sessions in the large group meeting room, which not only keeps the energy high but also serves as a time indicator, letting delegates know when the session is about to begin.

To keep the delegates actively engaged, we have them take part in introducing and acknowledging presenters. Each presentation is assigned to a small group, and two student delegates introduce each speaker. One introduces a fellow student, and the second introduces the guest speaker. Afterward, another student thanks the speaker and presents a token of appreciation, such as a YLF-branded coffee mug. To make this process seamless, the students meet with the speakers 15 minutes prior to their presentation to conduct interviews and gather information.

Orientation and Facilitator's Guide

As mentioned earlier, the appendix of this guide includes a sample "Facilitator's Guide to the Delegate Workbook," which serves as a companion reference to the student workbook. It provides helpful suggestions for YLF staff regarding the key training modules within the YLF program.

Given the varied experiences of your volunteer and paid staff, it is essential to conduct an effective, mandatory staff orientation before the student delegates arrive at YLF. The orientation should cover the following topics: an overview of the program, information on disability-specific and multicultural issues, and logistical details such as emergency procedures and safety evacuation plans. It's also important to recognize that your counseling staff may have varying levels of expertise in group facilitation, which is a key component for the success of small group sessions.

If needed, consider organizing a specialized training on group facilitation to ensure all staff are adequately prepared. Additionally, it is crucial to emphasize to staff providing personal care assistance that YLF is not a medical environment. Students should be encouraged to ask for assistance when needed, rather than having help offered to them inappropriately.

The Delegate Workbook

Student delegates receive several essential instructional materials to enhance their YLF experience and ensure it is a valuable learning opportunity. All materials are provided in the formats required by the students.

One of the key materials they receive is the "Delegate Workbook," which includes their daily YLF schedule, worksheet exercises for small group discussions, and a "Personal Leadership Goal Planning" section. This workbook helps students set personal goals and provides them with tools to apply what they've learned when they return to their communities.

In addition to the workbook, delegates receive a comprehensive "Resource Binder." This binder contains valuable information, including resources on goods and services available to people with disabilities, details about the Americans with Disabilities Act and other key legislation, and career-oriented information from schools and businesses. It also features a list of helpful websites for further exploration.

When delegates arrive at YLF, they are given a nylon or canvas bag filled with promotional and souvenir items donated by businesses that support the program.

Marketing and Outreach Materials

In addition to maintaining a website, distributing flyers, posting on social media, and sharing the program's message through various networks, it's important to document the events of your forum for several reasons, including creating promotional materials. In California, we produce videos that feature testimonials from delegates, where they share their experiences. To capture these moments, staff members use video and still photo cameras to record images throughout the forum. We also collaborate with a local film company that employs disabled workers interested in filmmaking and photography.

Furthermore, we create a promotional video that showcases an exciting series of images from the forum, including pictures of all the student delegates. The video also provides a brief overview of YLF's mission and purpose. It is filmed and edited during the forum and then shown as a surprise event during the final moments of the closing session. The video is later used by students and

staff to educate the community about YLF and to encourage donors to support the program.

A written summary report is produced within six months of the forum and mailed to both student delegates and staff as a commemoration of the event. This report also serves as a tool to promote YLF to potential sponsors, donors, and to recruit future delegates. As mentioned earlier, both the video and the summary report are effective tools for promoting the forum to community leaders, media outlets, potential donors, and staff.

Acknowledgements

The success of the forum relies heavily on the contributions of the volunteer staff, presenters, and financial donors. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge their support in as much detail as possible across all written materials, such as the program schedule, summary report, press releases, and other promotional content.

In California, each speaker is given a souvenir coffee mug featuring the YLF logo, which is presented by a delegate during the formal thank-you at the end of the presentation. Financial donors are also recognized with a plaque or souvenir that acknowledges their support of YLF.

Additionally, all those who contribute to YLF receive thank-you letters that include group photos of the delegates, as a gesture of appreciation for their involvement and generosity.

YLF Alumni Follow-up

It's crucial to maintain follow-up with all delegates to ensure that the forum isn't just a one-time event but the beginning of ongoing learning and growth for the students. Our post-forum communication with alumni includes several key steps:

One month after the forum, we send alumni the "letter to myself" that delegates wrote on the last day of the forum. This letter serves as a reminder of their commitments to take action once they return to their local communities.

Two months after the forum, the forum Chair sends a letter to each delegate, wishing them well and encouraging them to stay in touch. This letter also includes a copy of the group photo taken during the forum.

The **summary report** is shared with each delegate once it is completed, typically within six months of the forum.

After 30 years of successful programming, and over 1500 alumni from California, we are now improving our follow-up efforts by developing a study to track alumni progress. We plan to survey alumni at three intervals—three, five, and ten years after their participation—to gather data that will help us assess the success and impact of the forum, as well as support alumni in reaching their goals.

Through our follow-up, we've discovered that most alumni maintain relationships with each other and continue to use one another as resources while pursuing their career and social goals. It's incredibly rewarding to see them applying what they learned during the forum.

Alumni have shared numerous examples of how they've achieved extraordinary academic and career milestones, often returning to their communities as advocates for other students with disabilities and leaders in various community activities. These stories of post-forum success, in addition to the remarkable experiences during the forum itself, make us even more committed to continuing the Youth Leadership Forum and expanding its impact to reach even more youth with disabilities.

Regional YLF/Alumni Events

We highly recommend organizing follow-up sessions or reunions for alumni of your YLF, as these activities help strengthen the sense of camaraderie among alumni, encouraging them to stay connected and use each other as valuable resources. Your follow-up event could be as simple as a casual pizza party at a local restaurant or as formal as an educational workshop or training session.

In California, we host quarterly alumni workshops on a variety of topics to continue supporting delegates after they've participated in YLF. Additionally,

we've introduced Regional YLF activities to engage more students and provide alumni with opportunities to mentor others at the local level.

Our experience producing statewide forums has highlighted the growing need to include more students in YLF. The most effective way to achieve this is by organizing regional forums, which cover the essential YLF training modules.

A regional forum, similar to the original model, is intended for high school juniors and seniors. We suggest hosting the regional YLF at a local community college or event center over the weekend. In just two days, you can still incorporate the core principles of the forum, educate students about disability culture and history, and introduce them to resources that will help them achieve their goals. The format should include small discussion groups, as well as large group sessions with guest presentations. All presenters should remain role models who are adults with disabilities. Additionally, students should complete a "Personal Leadership Goal Planning" section to guide them once they return home.

Regional forums will typically have lower costs, as they are closer to students' geographical locations and take place over a shorter period. Furthermore, you may ask students to arrange their own transportation, reducing the need for transportation volunteers and services. However, we still strongly recommend providing all necessary support services, as they are integral to ensuring full access for all participants.

Expanding the YLF model to more communities is a wonderful goal for all States and Territories. The materials in this manual can serve as a framework to help bring YLF to even more students.

Work Experiences

Since a key goal of YLF is career development, we strongly recommend establishing an internship or work experience program for YLF alumni. In California, we are working with the California Department of Rehabilitation to create work experience opportunities that will allow qualified alumni to continue supporting the planning and execution of YLF. This collaboration not only helps alumni gain valuable work experience but also contributes to the ongoing success and growth of the YLF program.

Program Evaluation

In California, after each forum, we make slight adjustments to the program based on feedback from student delegates and staff. This feedback is gathered through a formal written evaluation survey completed on the final day of the program, as well as through discussions with our YLF Governance Committee to assess the overall success of the event. We anticipate continuing this practice to help us improve the program over time.

It took more than ten years after hosting our first forum to establish a formal follow-up study with our alumni. Moving forward, we plan to survey alumni at three intervals—three, five, and ten years after their forum participation—to gather valuable data to assess the program's success and long-term impact.

One of the most encouraging discoveries we've made through alumni follow-up is that most of them have maintained strong relationships with one another and continue to rely on each other as resources as they pursue and achieve their career and social goals. It's incredibly rewarding to see that they've truly put into action what we hoped they would learn during the forum.

Alumni have shared many inspiring stories about how they've achieved impressive academic and career milestones, and how they've returned to their communities as advocates for other students with disabilities and as leaders in various community activities. These post-forum successes, alongside the meaningful experiences during the forum itself, deepen our commitment to the YLF project and strengthen our dedication to making it accessible to more students in the future.