Youth Services Improvement Grants
Application Guidelines

Updated January 2021

Application Deadline: March 11, 2021, 3:00 PM EST
Program Overview

The Youth Service Improvement Grants (YSIG) program supports activities to improve the quality of direct services for young people ages 5 to 25 in the five boroughs of New York City. The goal is to strengthen existing services by helping youth-serving nonprofit organizations address challenges or remedy problems at the point of service, where staff and youth interact.

The YSIG program is aligned with the Foundation’s broader focus on reducing inequality in youth outcomes. Inequality in New York City is multifaceted, reflected in racial and economic segregation across boroughs and neighborhoods, in inadequate services for Mexican-descent youth and LGBTQ youth, and in a lack of racial, ethnic, gender identity, and sexual-orientation diversity among executive directors and CEOs of youth-serving organizations. We seek to improve the programming of youth-serving nonprofit organizations that confront these challenges.

YSIG is unique in that it urges applicants not only to discuss their organization’s promise and potential, but to identify gaps or challenges in the services they provide. We ask applicants to be critical and reflective, to consider why and how complications exist, and to articulate how they intend to improve the ability of their programming to provide positive impact on youth.

Applicants should describe their organization’s mission and the current youth programming that they propose to improve. The application should clearly describe a challenge or problem at the program’s point of service, outline how the organization identified the problem, and explain how the problem adversely affects the experiences or outcomes of youth participants. Next, the application should propose a specific, standalone improvement plan to address the issue, improve the targeted programming, and yield a positive effect on participants’ experiences. Strong proposals will make the case that the quality of youth services would improve if the issue were resolved, and will clearly describe a feasible, sustainable, and appropriate improvement. Examples of problem areas for improvement include: inadequate curriculum, gaps in the service skills of frontline staff, or a limitation in current services that adversely affects participants’ experiences. Beyond these examples, we welcome other compelling needs for service improvement.
Awards

Awards are $25,000 each and support projects lasting one year, starting on September 1, 2021. Although the Foundation is prepared to fully fund projects of $25,000, we are also willing to co-fund larger improvement efforts with other funders. Regardless of the size of the budget for the improvement project, we encourage applicants to commit some of their own resources through in-kind support or the use of unrestricted funds. We view this action as an indication of organizational commitment to the improvement project.

The Foundation will award up to six new Youth Service Improvement Grants annually.

In addition to providing grant support, grantees will participate in technical assistance activities designed to help them meet their improvement project goals. The technical assistance provider will provide one-on-one support as well as learning community cohort meetings over the term of the grant. One-on-one support will allow each grantee to receive customized assistance that will help them work toward the successful implementation of the improvement project. The learning community cohort meetings will focus on peer-based learning and coaching, allowing grantees to discuss challenges, seek advice from peers and colleagues, and collaborate across projects in a supportive space.
Eligibility

All YSIG applicants must be youth-serving nonprofit organizations based in any of the five boroughs of New York City whose staff have direct programmatic contact with youth at the point of service. Applicants must meet all organizational criteria to be eligible. Organizations previously funded under the YSIG program cannot apply again for at least 18 months after the end of their award.

Organizational Criteria

1. Serve youth ages 5 to 25. At least 80 percent of youth participating in the services targeted for improvement must be in this age range. The applicant’s staff must have direct contact with youth at the point of service.

2. Have their own 501(c)(3) tax-exemption. If an applying organization is separately incorporated but tax-exempt through a group ruling (religious institutions), the applicant should supply the 501(c)(3) letter of the parent organization and documentation that it is part of the group.

3. Have an operating budget between $250,000 and $5 million, if the organization serves youth only. If the applying organization serves youth and other populations, its operating budget must be less than $20 million and its youth services budget must be between $250,000 and $5 million.

4. Have most recent financial statements reviewed by an auditor, per New York State law requirement. If the organization’s annual budget is under $750,000, then certified public accountant’s reviewed financial statements are required.

5. Have filed IRS Form 990.
Reducing Inequality Criteria

To receive priority consideration, applicants must meet at least one of the reducing inequality criteria in addition to all organizational criteria.

1. **Provide youth services in one of the ten community districts identified as having the highest community risk to child well-being by the Citizens’ Committee for Children:**

   **BRONX:**
   CD 1 – Mott Haven  
   CD 2 – Hunts Point  
   CD 3 – Morrisania  
   CD 4 – Concourse/Highbridge  
   CD 5 – University Heights  
   CD 6 – East Tremont  
   CD 7 – Bedford Park  
   CD 9 – Union Port/Soundview

   **BROOKLYN:**
   CD 5 – East New York  
   CD 16 – Brownsville

   Organizational offices do not need to be based in one of these community districts, but the service targeted for improvement must currently operate in one of the districts. Organizations can identify the community districts in which they serve youth on the New York City Department of City Planning’s Community District Profiles webpage (https://communityprofiles.planning.nyc.gov/).

2. **Have existing well-defined programming tailored specifically to Mexican-descent youth or to LGBTQ youth; or**

   With New York City being a diverse metropolis, it is likely that many programs will serve young people in these groups. However, if services were not specifically designed for these populations, then the applicants are not eligible for priority consideration under this criterion.

3. **Have a leader (executive director or CEO) who is a person of color and/or is a member of the LGBTQ community.**
What we do not support

The YSIG program only supports improvement activities at the point of service for youth. We would not support:

- General operations.

- Planning, needs assessment, and evaluation proposals.

- Organizational improvement activities not focused on changes at the point-of-service, such as board development or financial system updates.

- Capital fund projects, scholarships, endowments, lobbying, real estate purchases, or awards to individuals.

- Expansions or additions to programming, including changes that simply increase the number of slots in a program or result in new programming. As such, all proposed budgetary items must be directly related to the proposed improvement.

- Public and private schools.

- Organizations that utilize fiscal sponsors/conduits.

- Organizations that are based outside the five boroughs of New York City.
Selection Criteria

Applications for Youth Service Improvement Grants are reviewed by a dedicated volunteer committee of Foundation staff once a year. Committee members have a diverse range of expertise, including finance, communications, and nonprofit administration. Thus, applications should be written to address an educated lay audience. If you use acronyms that may not be familiar to a lay audience, please be sure to spell them out the first time. If you use terms that are not commonly known, please provide relevant context and explanations.

The online application will be open on January 5, 2021. Proposals are due by March 11, 2021 (3:00 p.m. EST), for decisions in September 2021. Grantees will be selected according to the following criteria:

1. **Clear description of the organization’s mission and current youth services**
   - The applicant provides a clear, compelling explanation of how the current services create positive and meaningful experiences for youth.

2. **Compelling rationale for improvement**
   - The applicant clearly identifies a problem at the point of service and explains how the problem has adversely impacted the experiences of participants.
   - The applicant details how they identified the problem and clearly articulates its likely causes.
   - The applicant makes a strong case that the quality of services to youth would significantly improve if the problem were addressed.

3. **Strength of the improvement plan**
   - The improvement plan effectively addresses the problem: it is targeted specifically at the causes of the problem, it is likely to be effective, and it is sustainable.
   - The improvement activities can feasibly be implemented within the one-year grant period, which begins on September 1, 2021.
• The applicant identifies a capable staff member or manager to oversee the improvement plan and track progress across the timeline. This is different from staff working to implement the improvement.

• The applicant outlines a compelling plan to collect and use information to determine whether the improvement project is successful.

• The applicant makes the case that the improvement can be sustained operationally and financially.

• If additional funds will be required to continue the improvement after the grant period, the applicant provides a feasible plan to achieve sustainability.
Application Materials

Applicants must use the Foundation’s forms, which can be downloaded from the “resources” section of the YSIG webpage, or from within the online application. The forms include guiding questions from the background information and narrative sections below. Do no edit the forms or delete instructions from them. Only applications that use our forms will be reviewed. All documents should be uploaded to the online application.

1. **Background information on the organization (two-page total)**
   - Describe the organization’s overall mission and goals.
   - Briefly describe the current services you provide for all populations served.
   - If applicable, describe which reducing inequality criterion you meet. If your organization currently provides youth services in one or more of the ten community districts, and wants to improve those services, please state which community district(s) will be the focus of the application.
   - Describe the financial health of your organization, including major trends, challenges, or unusual developments that have affected the funding, staffing, or enrollment of your youth services over the past two years.

2. **Narrative (six pages total)**

*Description of youth services targeted for improvement (two pages maximum). Do not mention the improvement project activities in this section.*

- Describe the current youth services you want to improve, including participation in the programming: What does a participant experience on a day-to-day basis in the program? How often do youth attend and for how long do they stay with the services? How many youth participate in an average session? If there is a recruitment or selection process, please describe it.

- Which and how many staff are involved with the services (state names and titles) to be improved? What is the training and experience of staff, including front-line staff who have direct contact with youth?
• If you are seeking special priority through the improvement of existing services specifically for Mexican-descent or LGBTQ youth, please provide an in-depth description of those current services. Describe how programming is designed and implemented with the needs and experiences of those youth in mind.

• Describe the degree to which you have fulfilled your program goals and produced the intended youth outcomes. Please give examples and, if available, data.

Rationale for Improvement (two pages maximum)

• Clearly identify and explain the problem in the program’s direct services that you are seeking to improve. Describe how this problem has adversely impacted your program’s ability to serve youth and/or enhance youth outcomes.

• State how you identified the problem. What information derived from your program (e.g., data, surveys, observations, or discussions with youth and staff) brought this issue to your attention? How long has this issue existed? What are the likely underlying causes?

• Given your understanding of the problem and your investigation of its causes, explain why addressing the problem would address its impact on your program and youth outcomes.

Improvement Plan (two pages maximum)

• Describe the plan (include specific goals and activities) for addressing the problem and cause(s) of the problem that you have identified.

• Clearly detail how the proposed improvement will change your existing services and participants’ experiences.

• Provide a detailed timeline for the improvement plan, and affirm that the improvement activities can take place within a one-year grant period, beginning on September 1, 2021.

• Identify a staff member to manage the improvement plan and describe how this person will track progress against the timeline. Also identify staff members or consultants who will implement the changes.

• Describe how the organization will determine whether the improvement is addressing the problem: What information will be collected to assess short-term results?

• Describe how the organization will sustain the improvement financially and programmatically, accounting for challenges such as ongoing training needs or staff turnover. If the improvement activities will result in an increase in program costs, state how the organization will ensure financial sustainability after the grant period ends. Please be as specific as possible.
3. **Improvement project budget**
   - The improvement budget numbers will be entered into text boxes online. All applicants must also prepare and upload a budget justification using the Improvement Project Budget Justification Form (available on our grants management system). All items included on the budget must be directly related to the improvement. Identify any portion of the budget that will be funded by sources other than this grant, including support from the organization (e.g., in-kind or support from unrestricted funds) and support from third parties.

4. **Total organization budget**

5. **Total youth services budget (required for multiservice organizations)**
   - If the applying organization serves only youth, simply state that. No additional budget is required beyond File 4: Total Organization Budget.
   - Multiservice organizations (i.e., those not exclusively focused on youth) must upload a separate youth services budget in this section. The youth services budget must include all services to children and youth provided by the organization, not only the budget for services targeted for improvement.

6. **List of institutional funders of the organization**
   - Upload a list of institutional funders (foundations, corporations, etc.) that contributed more than $10,000 in the current fiscal year. (In the case of multiservice organizations, a list of supporters of youth programs should be submitted.)

7. **List of board of directors**

8. **Most recent financial statement**
   - Upload the most recent audited financial statement or certified public accountant’s reviewed financial statements (most recent year). The audit or certified public accountant’s reviewed financial statements must be uploaded with the application on the due date. Drafts are not accepted.

9. **501(c)(3) tax-exempt letter from the IRS**
   - Upload the organization’s 501 (c)(3) Tax Exempt Letter. Please make sure that the EIN or FIN number is listed on the 501 (c)(3).

10. **IRS Form 990**
Must my organization fit the Foundation’s priority considerations focused on reducing inequality?

No. Any organization that fits the organizational eligibility criteria may apply. Organizations that meet the organizational criteria AND any of the three reducing inequality criteria will receive priority for funding.

Our organization is not located in any of the ten community districts identified as having the highest community risk to child well-being, but we provide youth services in one of the districts. Are we eligible to apply for priority consideration?

Yes. Any organization that fits the organizational eligibility criteria and has an established youth-serving program in one of the identified 10 community districts may apply for special consideration. Serving some youth from the 10 community districts in locations outside of the community districts does not make an organization eligible for priority consideration.
Inclusive Programming for LGBTQ Youth: Kingsbridge Heights Community Center

Background

Kingsbridge Heights Community Center’s Teen Center provides academic support, STEM, arts and sports programming, college access activities, internships and leadership development to Bronx high school students ages 13-21.

Need

Some Teen Center participants display negative feelings about youth in the LGBTQ community, which has made it difficult for KHCC to recruit and retain LGBTQ youth in Teen Center. KHCC staff also lack expertise and training to effectively address bias incidents when they occur.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, Kingsbridge Heights Community Center will engage Horace Mann Institute and Transgender Equity Consulting, to update curricula and provide training to staff to make the program more inclusive to LGBTQ youth. They will also launch a new LGBTQ Youth Council to engage students to promote voice and choice, which KHCC hopes will facilitate recruitment of more LGBTQ youth.

BioBus for Spanish Speakers: BioBus

Background

BioBus’s Discover programs and Explore Lab courses provide hands-on science education to K-12 students in underserved areas of New York City. The Discover programs are 45-minute science lessons that take place in BioBus’s mobile laboratory, which has scientific equipment and scientists who teach age-appropriate lessons. The Explore programs are lab courses that are held after school and during weekends at community centers and at BioBus research labs.

Need

The Discover program engages many Spanish-speaking English Language Learners (ELL), but most of the organization’s scientists do not speak Spanish and all of the student worksheets are in English. The language barrier adversely affects the scientists’ ability to excite, engage, and teach ELL students and also inhibits students from moving to the advanced Explore Lab programs.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, BioBus will enroll their scientists in Spanish Language classes. BioBus will also hire a Spanish language tutor who will teach the scientists scientific terms and concepts in Spanish and work with them on the curricula that is taught in the mobile labs. Finally, BioBus will translate to Spanish all materials students use in the Discovery program.
Wellness Supports for OppNet Fellows: Opportunity Network

Background

Opportunity Network (OppNet) provides services to underserved New York City youth from the summer after 10th grade through college graduation. OppNet participants receive individualized college guidance, career exposure, one-on-one support through college, and five summers of paid internship or enrichment programming.

Need

Opportunity Network does not have a timely way or mechanism to identify their students’ need for health and wellness intervention outside of a crisis.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, OppNet will update how staff check for wellness among its in-college fellows. Staff will be trained to recognize behaviors and language that could be a sign of deeper problems and then provide direct interventions or referrals to the social work department. OppNet will standardize how it collects student wellness data so that a formal system may be created to provide quick, appropriate care to its participants.

Anti-Racism Training and Curriculum Revision: Opening Act

Background

Opening Act’s after-school programs are offered to students in public schools with lower than average graduation rates and to alternative high school students who previously faced court involvement, incarceration, homelessness, or teen pregnancy. Opening Act theater programs teach improvisation, acting technique, and writing exercises that culminate in a performance of students’ original work at a professional off-Broadway theater.

Need

Opening Act provides its teaching artists with anti-racism workshops as part of their training, but due to budget and capacity constraints this training is at an introductory level and anti-racism strategies are not integrated into the program curriculum. Specifically, the current training does not provide specific anti-racism practices that teaching artists could apply in the classroom when complex themes or issues arise during the improv and theater process.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, Opening Act’s staff will participate in the People’s Institute’s Undoing Racism Workshop, which is created specifically for educators. Opening Act will integrate key concepts from the workshop into their curriculum and have additional staff training to on how to implement the new curriculum.
Bridging the ELA and Math Gap: Kids Creative

Background

Kids Creative’s Rock 2 The Bronx after-school program serves students from three elementary schools. Students participate in the Create-A-Play program where they rotate through two class periods of theater, music, art, dance, leadership, sports, and peace education programming, culminating in the creation of an original musical show at the end of the term.

Need

Participants at the Rock 2 The Bronx come from schools where students score below state averages in English Language Arts and math. Kids Creative’s current curriculum is arts-focused and not specifically focused on direct academic improvement. The organization is without staff capable of developing or supporting education curricula for their programs.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, Kids Creative will hire a director of education to create math and literacy focused activities tailored to their programs and who will also train staff on how to implement these new activities.
Questions regarding the Youth Service Improvement Grants program may be sent to Sharon Brewster: sbrewster@wtgrantfdn.org.

If you encounter technical difficulties, please use the contact form located at the bottom of each page on the application system.