Youth Service Improvement Grants

2023 Application Guidelines
Updated January 2023

Application Deadline:
March 8, 2023, 3 PM EST
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*Cover image: South Bronx United Academy student athlete Sam Frimpong for SBU’s 2021 #PowerOf11 campaign. Photo by Joshua Guerra.*
Introduction

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.

YSIG urges applicants not only to discuss their organizations’ 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.

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.

Priority consideration: Reducing inequality

As part of the ongoing evolution of YSIG, which is one of a variety of good-neighbor grantmaking strategies the William T. Grant Foundation has pursued since the 1970s, Foundation leadership took stock of the program in 2018. This effort focused on assessing the landscape of youth inequality in New York City in order to gain insight into how we could do more to support young New Yorkers.

Ultimately, three major themes emerged:

1. Inequality corresponds with geography, with poverty rates well over 40 percent in some neighborhoods and too little of Foundation grant dollars going to those communities.

2. A purely place-based approach to grantmaking would neglect under-resources communities that are more geographically dispersed. Mexicans, now the third largest immigrant group in the city, have high rates of poverty but few established organizations tailored to their needs. LGBTQ youth are another group that is too often overlooked and whose well-being demands greater support.

3. There is a notable lack of racial, ethnic, gender identity and sexual-orientation diversity among executive directors and CEOs of youth serving organizations.
Today’s Youth Service Improvement Grants program capitalizes on these insights by prioritizing applications from organizations that: 1) provide direct services to youth in eleven community districts identified as having the highest risk to child well-being by the Citizens’ Committee for Children, 2) have existing programming tailored specifically to Mexican-descent or LGBTQ youth, or 3) are led by people of color or members of the LGBTQ community.
Awards

Awards are $25,000 each and support projects lasting one year, starting on September 1 of the award year.

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

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 as an indication of organizational commitment to the improvement project, especially in larger organizations.

NOTE

In addition to grant support, the Foundation also provides grantees access to technical assistance, including one-on-one support as your organization works toward successfully implementing the improvement project. In addition, three cohort-wide “learning community” meetings allow for peer-based learning and coaching, as well as opportunities to discuss challenges, seek advice from peers and colleagues, and collaborate across projects in a supportive space.
Eligibility

NOTE

The YSIG program awards grants only to youth-serving community-based nonprofit organizations 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 either of the Foundation’s Youth Service Grant programs cannot apply again for at least 18 months after the end of their award.

Organizational criteria

Applicants must meet all of the following criteria:

- Serve youth ages 5 to 25 years. 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.

- Have their own 501c3 tax-exemption. If an applying organization is separately incorporated but tax-exempt through a group ruling (religious institutions), the applicant should supply the 501c3 letter of the parent organization and documentation that it is part of the group.

- 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.

- 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.

- Have filed IRS Form 990.
Reducing inequality criteria

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

• Currently provide youth services in one of the eleven 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
  CD 12 – Williamsbridge
  
  **BROOKLYN:**
  
  CD 5 – East New York
  CD16 – Brownsville
  
  *Any organization that fits the organizational eligibility criteria and has an established youth-serving program in one of the identified 11 community districts may apply for special consideration. Serving some youth from the 11 community districts in locations outside of the community districts does not make an organization eligible for priority consideration.*

• Have existing well-defined programming tailored specifically to Mexican-descent youth

• Have existing well-defined programming tailored specifically to LGBTQ+ youth
  
  *Many programs serve Mexican-descent and LGBTQ+ youth, but only those organizations with programming specifically designed for these populations are eligible for consideration under this criterion.*

• Have leaders (executive directors or CEOs) who are people of color and/or members of the LGBTQ+ community.
What we do not support

*The YSIG program does not support:*

- General operations.
- Planning, needs assessment, and evaluation proposals.
- Program 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.
- Public and private schools.
- Organizations that utilize fiscal sponsors/conduits.
- Organizations that are based outside the five boroughs of New York City.
Application Materials

NOTE
The online application will open on January 4, 2023. Applications are due by March 8, 2023 (3:00 p.m. EST), for decisions in September 2023. We accept applications only through our online application system, which is accessible through our website. Instructions for creating and submitting your online application are also available online.

All applications must use the Foundation’s forms, which can be downloaded from the “resources” section of the YSIG webpage (https://wtgrantfoundation.org/grants/youth-services-improvement-grants), or from within the online application. The forms include guiding questions from the background information and narrative sections below. Do not 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.

All applications must include the following materials:

1. **Background information on the organization (two pages maximum)**
   - 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 eleven 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 maximum)**

   *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 priority consideration for improving existing services specifically designed 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 the 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 that demonstrates the improvement activities can take place within a one-year grant period, beginning on September 1, 2023.

• 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 in the online application).

• 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.) The Foundation wants to understand where you are in achieving your fundraising goals.

7. List of board of directors

8. Most recent audited 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 by the due date.

• Drafts are not accepted.
9. IRS Form 990

10. 501(c)(3) tax-exempt letter from the IRS

- Upload the organization’s 501c3 Tax Exempt Letter. Please make sure that the EIN or FIN number is listed on the 501c3.
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.

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.

Applications will be reviewed against the following criteria:

**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.

**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.

**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 of the award year.
- 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.
Appendix A: Ask the Grants Administrator

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 eleven 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. Organizational offices do not need to be based in one of these eleven 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/).
Appendix B: Recent Youth Service Improvement Grants

The New York City Urban Debate League: Improving Debate Curriculum for Better Student Outcomes in Low-Income Schools

Background

New York City Urban Debate League provides weekly or bi-weekly debate practices and workshops in low-income and Title 1 schools, which culminate with students competing in monthly Saturday debate tournaments.

Need

New York City Urban Debate League recruits teachers from Title I schools whose workloads are overwhelming, and thus are hesitant to teach debate to their students. The teachers also lack foundational knowledge about debate topics, theory, and practice. These two issues have led to retention issues with Urban Debate League’s program.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, NYC Urban Debate League will provide more direct support and instruction to their teachers in Title I schools. NYC Urban Debate League will also develop a curriculum and companion instructional materials to make the process easier for the teachers to instruct and for students to learn debate.

Oliver Scholars Program: Mental Health Support for Scholar Services

Background

Oliver Scholars’ Scholars Immersion and Placement (SIP) program provides academic preparation, age-appropriate social-emotional learning, test preparation, and leadership and critical thinking skills for high-achieving students of color from underserved New York City schools. The goal of the program is to prepare students for competitive independent and boarding high schools.

Need

Oliver Scholars counselors have noticed that their participants are experiencing escalated anxiety and depression, triggered by the effects of the pandemic, which has created persistent challenges for the program, including participants’ behavior.
Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, Oliver Scholars will hire a dedicated, licensed mental health specialist to create and pilot a mental health service program. The specialist will also train Oliver Scholars staff to recognize and be prepared to support and guide students in crisis.

Pride Center of Staten Island: Enhancing College Readiness for LGBTQ+ and Allied Youth on Staten Island

Background

Pride Center of Staten Island’s (PCSI) Grrrl Power Program provides services to LGBTQ+ young women and non-binary youth of color on Staten Island. The program includes topics such as leadership, self-esteem, gender roles, and conflict resolution. Grrrl Power Saturday Skills series focus on sexual health, financial literacy, employment, and education access.

Need

The results of an internal focus group showed that Grrrl Power participants had a desire to receive more college readiness programming, such as academic support, test preparation, and college admission coaching.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, PCSI will hire a college readiness specialist to develop and run a ten-session series of college readiness workshops informed by and designed for LGBTQ+ young women and non-binary youth. The consultant will also train PCSI staff to deliver the workshops and to train new staff when they join the organization.

Publicolor: Trauma-informed Training and Community-Building

Background

Publicolor’s continuum of project-based services for low-income New York City middle and high school students at risk of dropping out of school includes three programs: 1) Paint Club is an introductory community service program where participants paint their own schools and community buildings. 2) Color Club is a school-year program for youth in grades 7-9 that prepares them for the transition to high school by offering workshops on financial literacy, civic engagement, and career exploration. 3) Next Steps program serves students in grades 10-12 and focuses on college and career success.
Need

Publicolor noticed that the results of the pandemic had an adverse effect on its students, with participants exhibiting diminished socialization skills and elevated levels of disengagement with all programs. Publicolor’s staff lack the necessary tools to help their participants.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, Publicolor will hire Ramapo for Children to develop staff training and coaching that is centered on trauma-informed practices and resiliency frameworks. With this training, staff will be better prepared to provide the care that their students need.

Urban Word NYC: Healing Arts Mentor Training

Background

Urban Word NYC (UW) provides after-school poetry and spoken word workshops and in-school residency programs. Urban Word’s teaching artists use poetry to help students build writing skills, explore self-awareness, social identity, and address social justice issues.

Need

Urban Word (UW) lost many of its teaching artists during the pandemic, and its newly recruited teaching artists lack a foundation in poetry, spoken word, and creative expression. Furthermore, the pandemic caused UW’s participants to experience trauma and adverse mental health events.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, Urban Word will partner with New York University Metro Center and Teachers College Columbia University to co-create a scaffolded training program for its teaching artists, focused on trauma-informed pedagogy, while also integrating healing arts practices into its curriculum.

Youth Justice Network: Catalyzing Justice Through Science

Background

Youth Justice Network (YJN) was started at the alternative high school on Rikers Island to address the disproportionate incarceration of youth people of color, and to support them as they return home. Young people are paired with advocates who provide mentoring, coaching, and resources to support participants’ health, well-being, and academic goals on and off Rikers Island.
Need

Youth Justice Network’s high school equivalency (HSE) curriculum, particularly its science curriculum, lacks relevance to YJN’s participants, which has led to students’ disengagement, absences from class, and increased withdrawal from the HSE program.

Improvement Plan

For their Youth Service Improvement Grant, Youth Justice Network will hire a curriculum developer to create a science curriculum that better engages students, for instance by having them conduct experiments in biology, environmental science, chemistry, and physics.