Youth Service Improvement Grants

2026 Application Guidelines
Updated January 2026

Application Deadline:
April 1, 2026, 3:00 PM ET

Contents

Cover photo: 2021 Youth Service Improvement Grantee Chess in the Schools.

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.

Awards

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

- The Foundation aims to award six new Youth Service Improvement Grants annually.

ℹ 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. Additionally, grantees will have at least one networking touchpoint that will allow for peer-based learning and collaboration.

Eligibility

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 direct service program 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 501(c)(3) tax-exemption.
  - If operating under fiscal sponsorship, confirmation of fiscal sponsorship agreement is required.
  - 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 is part of the group.
- The applying organization (not the fiscal sponsor) must have an operating budget between $250,000 and $5 million in the prior year (i.e., 2025), 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 audited financial statements or certified financial statements, ideally 2025 or 2024, from the applying organization or from the fiscal sponsor if the organization is operating under fiscal sponsorship.
- Have a 990 for the applying organization (or explain your exemption). Or, if operating under fiscal sponsorship, the fiscal sponsor much have a 990.

Additional considerations: Reducing inequality criteria

The YSIG program is aligned with the Foundation's broader focus on reducing inequality in youth outcomes. Inequality in New York City is reflected in racial and economic segregation across boroughs and neighborhoods and in inadequate services for Mexican-descent youth and LGBTQ+ youth. We seek to help improve the quality of direct service programs provided by youth-serving nonprofit organizations that confront these challenges.

Meeting the criteria below is not a requirement for funding. However, applicants who fulfill at least one reducing inequality criteria in addition to all organizational criteria described above will receive priority consideration.

1. 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

   BROOKLYN:

   CD 5 – East New York

   CD 16 – Brownsville

   MANHATTAN:

   CD 11 – East Harlem

   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 meet the priority consideration.

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

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 are based outside the five boroughs of New York City

Application Materials

All applications must include the following materials:

1. **Background information on the organization (one page maximum)**

- Describe the organization's overall mission and goals.
- Briefly describe the current services you provide for all populations served.
  - 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)**

Background on direct service program you want to improve (two pages maximum)

- Describe the current youth services you want to improve, including participation in the programming:
  - State how staff engage with youth at the point of service and the intended benefit of the program.
  - Comment on what percent of youth participating in the direct service program targeted for improvement fall within the age range of 5-25 years.
  - 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?

- 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 of the award year.

- 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.

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) for the applying organization or fiscal sponsor if the organization is operating under fiscal sponsorship. Drafts are not accepted.

9. IRS Form 990

- A copy of the 990 (ideally from 2025 or 2024) must be uploaded by the applying organization for the applying organization or fiscal sponsor if the organization is operating under a fiscal sponsorship.

10. 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).

Review Criteria

ⓘ NOTE

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 program with direct point-of-contact 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 either of the two 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, an organization that fits the YSIG organizational eligibility criteria and has an established youth-serving program in one of the identified 11 community districts may apply for the YSIG program. Applicants will need to demonstrate that a significant portion of the organization's overall work is carried out in the community district(s).

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

Organization	Background	Need	Improvement Plan
Maysles Institute	Maysles Institute's Vanguard DocMakers (VDM) program is a "documentary filmmaking program for youth, ages 18-24, impacted by systems of injustice, such as housing insecurity, criminal justice involvement, and mental health challenges."	Integrating art therapy with filmmaking has posed a challenge as VDM has relied on Licensed Creative Arts Therapists who do not directly specialize in filmmaking-related art therapy. This gap has led to challenges in balancing therapeutic practices with technical film training, limiting student engagement and emotional growth.	VDM aims to develop a new curriculum that merges art therapy with filmmaking techniques to improve their programming. Maysles' goal is to create tools and exercises that help students process personal challenges while developing technical skills.
JQY Inc.	JQY (Jewish Queer Youth) is a mental health organization that "empowers Jewish queer teens and young adults to live healthy, joyful lives" through culturally competent mental health services and community-building initiatives. JQY seeks to improve its warmline and support group services.	The warmline, a confidential phone and text support service, does not have provide staff the capability to efficiently follow up with callers. At the same time, JQY's support groups currently operate as open drop-in sessions, limiting structured progression and long-term benefits.	One component of JQY's improvement plan involves transitioning the warmline to an advanced platform to improve caller interactions. A second component will allow staff to establish structured support groups with ongoing participation commitments and tailored plans for participants.
The Sylvia Center	The Sylvia Center's (TSC) mission is to create healthy communities by educating young people and families through culinary programming that promotes health and well-being.	TSC has identified a skills and training gap between education staff that is impacting the quality of their youth services.	TSC plans to implement a series of monthly training sessions for members of their education team. The goals for these skill-building sessions are to establish a uniform knowledge base and reinforce expectations about content delivery.

Organization	Background	Need	Improvement Plan
Teens for Food Justice	Teens for Food Justice (TFJ) "delivers STEM education, nutrition literacy, and food justice programming through hydroponic farming to middle and high school students across New York City."	Through feedback from educators, students, and school partners, Teens for Food Justice identified inconsistencies in curriculum delivery, classroom management, and farm operations.	TFJ plans to develop a standardized training program for their Farmer-Educators. This will include a video-based training series and a four-day Farmer-Educator Intensive to provide all new and existing staff with a shared foundation of knowledge.
Christodora, Inc.	Christodora supports New York City youth with access to a range of opportunities (e.g. ecology lessons, summer camp sessions, and field trips). Their Community of Rising Environmentalists (CORE) program provides small-scale learning opportunities for middle and high school students.	Christodora staff has identified three key challenges: short-term planning, repetitive content, and staff development.	Christodora plans to improve their programming by hiring a part-time Science Education Specialist to design a long-term cycling curriculum for CORE, support CORE's Saturday sessions, and encourage professional development for other staff.
Building Beats	Building Beats is a nonprofit organization that provides hands-on programs in DJing, music production, and entrepreneurship to help youth succeed in creative industries.	Building Beats identified an improvement issue in their bbLeaders Creative Pathways program, notably an inconsistency in structured mentorship.	Where mentorship within the Creative Pathways program currently develops organically through guest workshops and events, Building Beats aims to implement a structured one-on-one mentorship model. Each participant will be matched with an industry professional who will provide personalized feedback, creative guidance, and career insights.

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