



Service-Learning: Tips for RHY Program Staff

Looking for ways to expand the horizons of young people in your program? Consider service-learning. Through service-learning, even young people in difficult circumstances can connect real-world service experience with learning. In the process, they gain practical skills, help their communities, and learn to see beyond challenges (including their own) to solutions that lie ahead.

Understanding Service-Learning

What is service-learning?

Service-learning combines service and learning, with an equal emphasis on each. Youth engaged in service-learning not only help others and strengthen their communities, but also learn and grow in their knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Why should I think about service-learning?

Successful service-learning has benefits for young people, communities and organizations. It:

- helps young people develop practical skills, self-esteem, and a sense of civic responsibility;
- helps runaway and homeless youth learn they can have a voice and an important role in the community;
- strengthens communities by addressing needs and helping community members see that runaway and homeless youth can contribute positively; and,
- benefits organizations by improving staff members' level of engagement and work satisfaction, creating new partnerships and resources, raising awareness about youth homelessness in the community, and increasing public support for the organization.

How is service-learning different from community service or volunteering?

Research has shown that community service or volunteering of any sort benefits young people. Service-learning, however, goes a step further by guiding young people as they thoughtfully plan a service project, think about the causes of a community issue and how best to address it, and most importantly reflect on their experience and what they learned.

Who should participate in service-learning programs?

All young people should be involved in service-learning opportunities. All young people deserve the chance to learn skills and contribute to the community. Service-learning experiences should not be used as a reward for young people who behave appropriately. It should be considered a program component in which all youth are eligible to participate.

Can youth in crisis benefit from service-learning programs?

Yes! With support and guidance from caring adults, youth in runaway and homeless youth programs can and do contribute to their communities, learn leadership and other valuable skills, develop a sense of self-efficacy and self-worth, and gain community connections.

Making Service-Learning Part of Your Program

How can I implement a service-learning program with young people?

Service-learning projects can be short-term, long-term or ongoing. No matter the project, just be sure young people play a key role in the planning, implementing and reflecting. *Service-Learning in Community-Based Organizations: A Practical Guide to Starting and Sustaining High-Quality Programs*, developed by the Search Institute for the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, describes service-learning as a six-step process:

Investigate. This step ensures that the service provided is meaningful to the participants and those being served. It also teaches youth research and analytical skills.



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Youth can investigate community concerns by walking around the community, reading newspapers, conducting surveys, or interviewing key leaders. Ask youth to make a list of their concerns or what they see as needs. Ask: What is the cause? What are some possible solutions? Who is already helping?

Prepare. Engage young people in coming up with ideas for the project and how they want to carry it out. Ask: What are your learning goals? What are your service goals? Figure out what needs to be done by when and what resources you'll need.

Work out who you may want to partner with and what their responsibilities will be. (See more on partnering below.) And think about how you'll measure your project's success.

Act. After planning, youth get to provide meaningful service in the community. Several steps can ensure that young people feel successful at this stage. Help young people set clear expectations, assignments, and schedules. Also, assist young people to identify appropriate tasks for their skills, maturity, and interests.

Reflect. This step often differentiates service-learning from community service. Reflection is critical for quality service-learning; reflection is more than talking about feelings. It should involve challenging thinking, analysis, and problem solving. Ask: What difference did our actions make? Why do you think things are the way they are? What skills did you learn through this process? How did participating in this process make you feel? What changes will you make because of what you learned?

While reflection should occur before, during, and after providing service, it's especially important following the service experience so that young people can combine the experience with their learning.

Demonstrate and celebrate. Have young people show what they know and what they've done using artifacts, stories, photos, and data from the project. Some youth might feel comfortable speaking publicly about the project, while others would prefer to write a letter to a community newspaper or design a flyer that raises awareness about an issue.

Celebrate a job well done by inviting participants, family members, partners, and community members to acknowledge young people's growth and learning. This step reinforces young people's commitment to being civically engaged and shows that the community appreciates their efforts. Provide a certificate or something that acknowledges a job well done. Don't forget to have them include this project on any applications or resumes they may need for jobs or school.

Sustain. Make service-learning integral to your organization. Reflect on the results from completed service-learning projects to guide your next efforts. Help youth find ways they can use their own abilities and interests to pursue their next service experience—whether or not they're still part of your program.

Refer to *Service-Learning in Community-Based Organizations: A Practical Guide to Starting and Sustaining High-Quality Programs* for more tips and tools to get you started and examples of community-based organizations that have implemented high-quality service-learning programs with the young people they serve.

I'm not sure my program can do this alone. Who can we partner with?

Service-learning programs are more likely to be successful amid stable, lasting relationships with partners such as high schools, colleges, community service programs, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, and Tribal nations. Work with your partners to develop a cohesive, long-term vision for the service-learning partnership that aligns with each organization's goals.

Where do I go if I have more questions?

Learn and Serve America (<http://www.learnandserve.gov>)

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (<http://www.servicelearning.org/>)

National Service-Learning Partnership (<http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/site/PageServer>)