



UNITED WAY
Santa Cruz County

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HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN PARTNER WITH YOUTH FOR LASTING CHANGE

City Leaders Summit - April 2026

OUR MISSION

We ignite our community to give, advocate and volunteer so that our youth succeed in school and life, our residents are healthy, and our families are financially independent.

OUR INITIATIVES

UNITED4YOUTH | UNITED4COMMUNITY | **2.1.1**
Santa Cruz County

WHAT WE DO

We unite donors, volunteers, advocates, nonprofits, government, and community members to strengthen the building blocks of a thriving Santa Cruz County.



REFLECTION POLL



In two sentences:
**What motivated you
to serve your
community?**

Please be ready to share with a neighbor in 30 seconds

AGENDA OVERVIEW

8:30 – 8:45 AM	Welcome & Framing
8:45 – 9:10 AM	Showcasing 4 Impact Stories
9:10 – 9:35 AM	Innovation Rounds
9:35 – 9:45 AM	Report Out & Call to Action

Please participate by answering all polls and connecting with nearby partners for reflection.

REFLECTION POLL



What best describes your role in local government?

1. Elected Official
2. City Manager or Assistant City Manager (appointed chief administrator of city operations)
3. Other City Staff / Department Head
4. Legislative / Policy Staff or Advocate
5. Other

REFLECTION POLL



Which of the following currently exist in your city?

1. Youth advisory group or council
2. Paid youth roles (interns, liaisons, fellows)
3. Youth input in policy decisions
4. Youth input in funding/budget decisions
5. None of the above

REFLECTION POLL



How would you describe youth engagement in your city today?

1. Youth are informed
2. Youth are consulted
3. Youth collaborate with decision-makers
4. Youth lead initiatives or influence decisions

REFLECTION POLL



What is the biggest barrier to stronger youth engagement in your city?

1. Lack of funding
2. Lack of staff capacity
3. Not sure how to engage youth meaningfully
4. Limited buy-in from leadership
5. Difficulty reaching diverse youth

REFLECTION POLL



**Why do you think it is
important to invest
in youth?**

SESSION OBJECTIVES



Attendees will explore four proven strategies cities are using right now:

1. Adopt a Children & Youth Bill of Rights
2. Secure sustainable funding through dedicated city funds
3. Establish Youth Liaison roles
4. Implement Youth Participatory Action Research (Y-PAR)

Takeaways include:

- Real examples with results
- Clear steps to implement in your city

IMPACT STORY

CHILDREN & YOUTH BILL OF RIGHTS



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CHILDREN & YOUTH BILL OF RIGHTS

1. They have a healthy mind, body and spirit that enables them to maximize their potential.
2. They develop a healthy attachment to a parent, guardian, or caregiver and an ongoing relationship with a caring and supporting adult.
3. They have a safe and healthy environment, including homes, schools, neighborhoods and communities.
4. They have access to quality education that promotes future success in school, career and life.
5. They have training in life skills that will prepare them to live independently, be self-sufficient and positively contribute to their community.
6. They have employment opportunities with protections from unfair labor practices.
7. They have freedom from mistreatment, abuse and neglect.
8. They voice opinions in matters of interest to them, develop their leadership capacity and engage in their community.
9. They feel supported by the larger community and maintain a sense of hope for the future.
10. They are encouraged to explore and express their innate curiosity and creativity.



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CHILDREN & YOUTH BILL OF RIGHTS

THE PROBLEM

- U.S. has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- No national framework to protect youth rights
- Local gap in youth voice, well-being, and inclusion in decisions

WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED

- Partnered with youth and local leaders to advance the Children & Youth Bill of Rights
- Started in the City of Santa Cruz, expanded countywide, adopted across all jurisdictions
- Youth played a central role in advocacy and decision-making

CHILDREN & YOUTH BILL OF RIGHTS

WHAT CHANGED

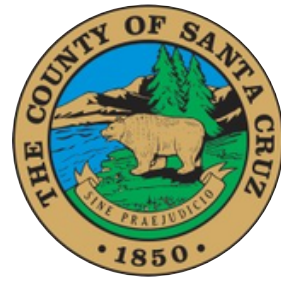
- Cities and councils prioritize youth voice in decisions
- Stronger expectation for youth inclusion across jurisdictions
- Youth actively engaged in governance (e.g., Santa Cruz, Capitola)

WHY IT WORKED

- Practical, low-cost approach with clear value
- Centered youth voice - compelling and hard to ignore
- Built lasting impact and sustainable partnerships

HOW YOUR CITY CAN DO THIS

- Engage Youth in Co-Creation
- Draft the Framework
- Build Partnerships
- Bring to Council for Adoption
- Build Momentum
- Embed into City Priorities



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“As a graduating senior, and an active member of the youth community through programs like Summer in the City and Jóvenes Sanos, I’ve seen the true difference it makes when young people feel heard and supported. Passing the **Children and Youth Bill of Rights** in Santa Cruz County is more than a policy decision, it’s a promise to us... a promise that our county truly values our voices, safety, and future.”

-Mitzel Dodge, 17 years old



IMPACT STORY

CAPITOLA CHILDREN'S FUND



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CAPITOLA CHILDREN'S FUND

THE PROBLEM

- Funding for youth programs is often inconsistent and considered discretionary
- Youth programs are among the first to be reduced when budgets are tight

WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED

- In 2018, Capitola voters approved a Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) increase
- Created a dedicated Children's Fund to provide stable, long-term investment in youth and programs

CAPITOLA CHILDREN'S FUND

WHAT CHANGED (RESULTS)

- Stable, increased investment in youth programs
- Expanded access to afterschool, enrichment, and wellness programs
- Youth funding shifted from discretionary to protected

WHY IT WORKED

- TOT funding tied to tourism, not residents
- Framed youth investment as a long-term community benefit
- Strong leadership and partnerships turned funding into real outcomes

FUNDING OPTIONS FOR YOUR CITY

- Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT)
(Tourism Cities)
- Cannabis Tax
- Sales Tax Measure
- General Fund Carve-Out



IMPACT STORY

SCOTTS VALLEY YOUTH LIAISON PROGRAM



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All Children Thrive
California

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YOUTH LIAISON PROGRAM

THE PROBLEM

- Limited opportunities for youth leadership and civic engagement outside of school
- Youth express strong interest in influencing decisions that affect their lives and well-being

WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED

- Launched Pathways to Possibilities with support from All Children Thrive
- Engaged youth in collecting local data on health and well-being
- Developed and proposed a Youth Liaison model to connect youth directly with local government

YOUTH LIAISON PROGRAM

WHAT CHANGED (RESULTS)

- Youth trained in policy and advocacy
- Regular youth engagement in City Council meetings
- Council members attended youth-led events
- Built strong, reciprocal youth–government relationships

WHY IT WORKED

- Centered on relationship-building and youth leadership
- Consistent training and engagement built trust
- Mutual presence reinforced authentic partnership

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

- Create a paid Youth Liaison role (stipend-based) to ensure access and consistency
- Assign the liaison to the City Manager's Office or City Council as a formal point of connection
- Set a regular structure with partners involved
- Define a clear roles
- Provide basic training and mentorship



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All Children Thrive
California

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IMPACT STORY

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH



UC SANTA CRUZ | Campus +
Community



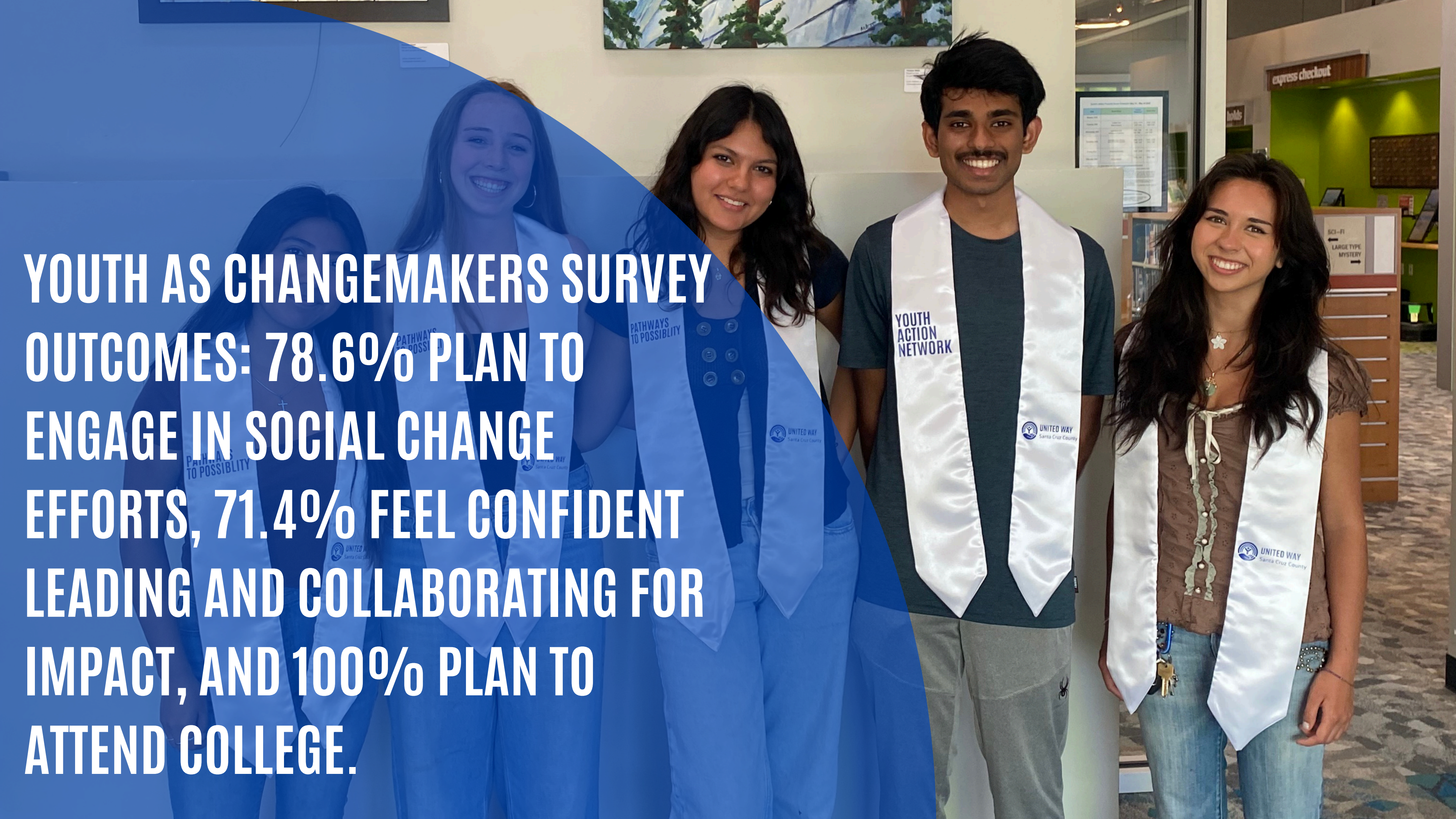
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"Youth are taught to listen. From an early age, we are conditioned to absorb information. Listen and learn in school, listen and learn from authority figures, but rarely are we encouraged to speak on our own experiences. This is why so many young people struggle to transition from passive listeners to active voices.

Programs like Jóvenes Sanos and YPAR change that by giving youth the tools and confidence to share their voices and empower others to do the same."

-Gabriel Melgoza, 17 years old



**YOUTH AS CHANGEMAKERS SURVEY
OUTCOMES: 78.6% PLAN TO
ENGAGE IN SOCIAL CHANGE
EFFORTS, 71.4% FEEL CONFIDENT
LEADING AND COLLABORATING FOR
IMPACT, AND 100% PLAN TO
ATTEND COLLEGE.**

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

THE PROBLEM

- Youth perspectives often excluded from community decision-making
- Limited understanding of how community conditions affect youth well-being and safety

WHAT WE IMPLEMENTED

- Partnered with UC Santa Cruz to engage youth as research leaders
- Youth defined research questions, collected data, and conducted analysis

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

WHAT CHANGED (RESULTS)

- 100+ youth and undergraduates participated in research
- Gathered insights from 542 county residents on wellness, safety, economic security, and discrimination
- Findings emphasized the importance of accessible services, safe communities, and supportive environments for youth well-being

WHY IT WORKED

- Youth led the research process and linked findings to real community concerns

WHY CITIES SHOULD CARE

- Better data = better policy
- Youth-led research leads to more informed decisions
- Community buy-in
- Inclusive processes build trust and stronger support
- Youth ownership
- Young people are more invested in solutions they help shape





**72.4% OF YOUTH FEEL
THEY HAVE A VOICE IN
DECISION-MAKING, ONLY
56.3% SAY THEY HAVE
REAL INFLUENCE**

SMALL-GROUP INNOVATION ROUNDS



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REFLECT & DISCUSS

What feels most feasible in your community?
Turn to a partner and discuss.

Select ONE:

- ☐ Children & Youth Bill of Rights
- ☐ Youth Liaison Role
- ☐ Youth Participatory Action Research (Y-PAR)
- ☐ Dedicated Youth Funding

REFLECT & DISCUSS

What is one real barrier your city faces in meaningfully engaging youth?

- *Think about systems, resources, or relationships*
- *Be specific: what gets in the way?*

What is one action your city could take to begin addressing this barrier?

- *Be realistic*
- *What could happen in the next 3–6 months?*

REFLECT & DISCUSS

How can youth be meaningfully involved in this solution?

- Where can youth lead vs. advise?
- What would authentic partnership look like?

REFLECT & DISCUSS

Who are key partners needed to move this forward?

- City staff? Schools? Community organizations?
Youth themselves?
- Who has decision-making power?

REFLECT & DISCUSS

What is your first step within 60 days?
(Be specific—meeting, email, proposal, pilot, etc.)

REFLECT & DISCUSS

If this is successful, what
will be different for
youth in your
community?

IDEAS INTO ACTION



What will you do next?

- Identify ONE strategy
- Commit to ONE action in 60 days
- Identify ONE partner



QUESTIONS?



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