

**YOUTH VOICE IN POLICY**

# **A GUIDE TO SHAPING HISTORY**



## INTRODUCTION

**W**elcome to the Youth Voice in Policy: A Guide to Shaping History! In this guide you will learn the basic skills you need to advocate for the issues you feel are important. This guide was made specifically for youth who have received mental health services and who have experienced multiple child-serving systems. Sharing that experience is a key part of effective advocacy. But before you can go and tell the world what's what, you need to understand how policy fits together. So, we'll start with how our government works and how federal policy is made. Once you get those basics, we'll move on to the tools you need when delivering your message. This is the public speaking and strategic sharing of your story. Now let's get prepared to start shaping history!!

## HOW IS THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT SET UP?

**T**he United States is really a collection of 50 different governing states that are united under one central government. This central government came to be because of the U.S. Constitution, which is a huge document that lays the foundation of how our country runs. The Constitution describes how the federal government relates to states and to the people of the United States.

Since every state is a little different we are going focus on how the federal government operates. This is because the decisions made by the federal government will affect everyone who reads this, as long as you are living in the United States. In order to ensure that no one person could ever have too much power, the government invented a system of checks and balances. So what this means is that there are three different branches (or groups) that have different responsibilities and powers.

1. The **Executive Branch** carries out actions, and is basically responsible for running the country.
2. The **Legislative Branch** makes laws, which give permission to the executive branch to make those actions.
3. The **Judicial Branch** makes sure that laws are in line with the Constitution.

These branches work together to create and implement laws and determine if they are within the guidelines of the U.S. Constitution.

1. The Executive Branch of the government is made up of the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, and the different federal agencies. These different people and departments are often referred to as "the administration." So, if you ever hear someone say, "I'm not sure if this will happen under the current administration," you know they are talking about the President and his staff.
2. The Legislative Branch is also known as the United States Congress. Congress is divided into two separate "chambers," or bodies: one being the House of Representatives (sometimes just called "the House"), and the other the Senate. Neither chamber is greater than the other—they are equal in power. The reason why there are two is to help balance that power.
3. The Judicial Branch is also known as the Supreme Court, and is made up of 8 judges called Associate Justices and 1 judge who is the Chief Justice. The main purpose of the Supreme Court is to determine if the bills passed by the Legislative Branch and signed into law by the President are within the guidelines of the U.S. Constitution.

## HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

***An idea becomes a bill.*** A bill first starts as an idea. Let's say that you come up with an idea about something that you think should be a law. Next, you would take this idea to your Congressional member in the House

or the Senate to sponsor the idea. If the Congressional member agrees with your idea, he or she would bring it to his/her staff that puts your idea into legal language, and then your idea becomes a bill!!

**Getting support for the bill.** Once this bill is written, it is passed to other members of Congress to get them to cosign on to the bill. This is another place that you can help advocate for change. Once the bill is looking for cosponsors you can write or visit with your congressional member and ask that they cosign on to the bill. One of the most effective ways you can do this is by starting a letter writing campaign and getting as many people as you can to write to their congressional members as well. The more cosponsors the bill has, the more likely it is to become a law.

**Committee process.** Once the bill has enough cosigners, it is introduced and referred to committee. A committee is a group of select congressional members that are assigned to review legislation that relates to certain issues. The committee sometimes sets up a hearing, or even a series of hearings, where experts, including youth like you, provide testimony and answer questions on the bill, and why it should or shouldn't be passed. The bill then goes through a "markup process" where the committee members make amendments (or changes) to the bill based upon what they have been informed about. By speaking with these congressional members or their staff at their offices, during briefings or even during committee meetings you can have a strong impact on shaping this policy. Once all this grunt work is done, committee members vote on the amendments and then vote to send the bill to the Floor. The Floor is where all the members of

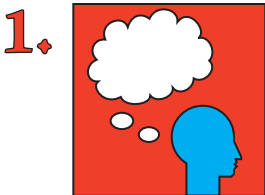
the House or the Senate have the opportunity to vote on the bill.

**Voting on the Floor.** Once a bill is on the House or Senate Floor, all the members of that chamber have a chance to discuss the bill, and make amendments. Once again, this is a critical time where you can send letters to all House or Senate members getting them to support your bill. The members can then take a vote on whether or not to pass the bill.

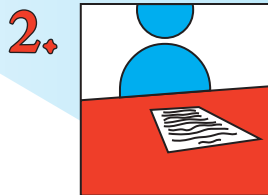
**Passing to the other chamber.** Once a bill is passed it is sent to the other chamber to be put through the same process all over again. When both chambers agree and pass the same bill, the bill is sent to the President.

**The President's decision.** The President can then sign the bill into law or veto the bill and send it back to Congress. In the case that he does sign the bill into law, it is up to the different federal agencies to start implementing what the law says to do. The agency may set rules that further guide the desired outcomes that your idea originally stated. Therefore it is important to follow what these different agencies do and how they implement this new law.

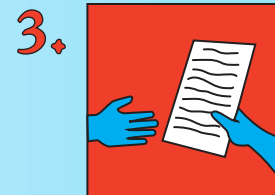
Now that you know a little about how our government is set up and how laws are made, let's look at how these laws are implemented—in other words, how they make it from paper to affecting our lives.



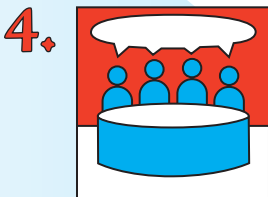
YOUR IDEA



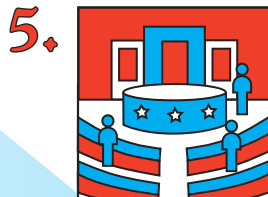
YOUR CONGRESSPERSON  
AND THEIR STAFF WRITE  
YOUR IDEA INTO A BILL



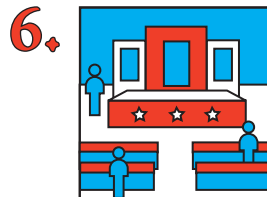
THE BILL IS PASSED FOR  
COSIGNING AND REFERRAL  
TO COMMITTEE



COMMITTEE  
PROCESS: HEARINGS  
AND AMENDMENTS



BILL IS SENT TO THE  
HOUSE OR THE SENATE  
FOR VOTING



BILL IS SENT TO  
OTHER CHAMBER  
FOR VOTING



BILL IS SENT TO THE  
PRESIDENT TO SIGN  
INTO LAW

## EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

**T**he Constitution gives the President the power to make an assignment to a particular federal agency to create rules or regulations that will achieve the desired outcome of the law. The President and his staff in the White House couldn't possibly make all the regulations themselves, so they divvy out these tasks to people who have expertise in specific subject areas. These experts make up the specific departments that make the actual statute of law and are given permission to enforce them.

There are many federal agencies, but the one you want to get very familiar with is the Department of Health and Human Services. This department oversees everything to do with the physical, mental, and social well being of the citizens of this country. More than likely this would be the department that you would be working with to address issues around child welfare and mental health. You might want to do a little more research on them and understand their structure better.

### *Federal Register*

The Federal Register can be found at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/> but it can be very confusing to navigate and to understand. If you are having trouble, ask an experienced and trusted adult to explain it to you. Commenting on regulations in the Federal Register is where your voice can be effective in creating change. Usually large advocacy groups watch these regulations closely. Reach out to them and let them know your opinions, but be quick about it because all pending regulations have time limits—some as little as thirty days.

### *Review of Regulations*

In order to preserve states' rights and to ensure that the voice of the public is being heard, there is a review process of federal regulations to ensure that they are fair, achievable, and are in the best interest of the public. Wherever possible, federal agencies obtain the views of appropriate state, local, and tribal officials before imposing any regulations or requirements that might significantly affect those governmental entities. These agencies and departments

also assess the effects of federal regulations on state, local, and tribal governments, including the availability of resources to carry out those mandates, and seek to minimize burdens that significantly affect them.

Once a rule or regulation is made final it is given a code and placed in the Code of the Federal Register. This publication contains all the permanent rules published in the Federal Register.

### *States' Rights*

Once regulations are fully established, state governments and agencies must put them into effect. Sometimes state legislatures must pass laws in order to incorporate the new regulations. Other times different agencies might make policy or program changes to fit the new federal guidelines. If a state does not comply with the federal policies they can lose existing funding, or might not be given access to additional funding. Because federal support is important for the state's budget, states tend to comply.

### *Where to Make Your Voice Heard*

Now that you've learned a little bit about how the government works and policy is made, let's review all the different places where you as a youth advocate can use your voice to help shape policy.

1. First is by voting. If you are over 18 and a legal citizen you have the right to vote for the elected official that represents you. Special note: If you live in Washington, DC you actually have no voting representation in Congress!
2. You can present an Idea to your congressman and ask that a bill about that issue be drafted.
3. Advocate for other congressional members to cosign on to the bill.
4. Testify at committee hearings and briefings.
5. Make comments on the Federal Register.
6. Ask your congressman to support or not support certain regulations.
7. Meet with your state legislators and advocate on the implementation of federal regulations.

Now that you know some of the different areas where you can include your voice it's a good idea to learn how best to deliver it. This next section will

cover effective public speaking and strategic sharing and will help you be more effective and dynamic when you start getting involved in shaping policy!

## PUBLIC SPEAKING

**K**nowing where to include your voice is important but knowing how to include it is just as important. Public speaking can be a very difficult experience for some people. It can be very intimidating to stand up in front of a large group or even a small one and talk about important issues. For you as youth advocates this experience can be even more difficult, as the issues you are more than likely discussing are your own personal experiences. However the better prepared you are to present the more confident you will be and the calmer you will feel. So that is why this next section is designed to provide you with the knowledge that you will need to speak effectively.

### *Know Your Audience!*

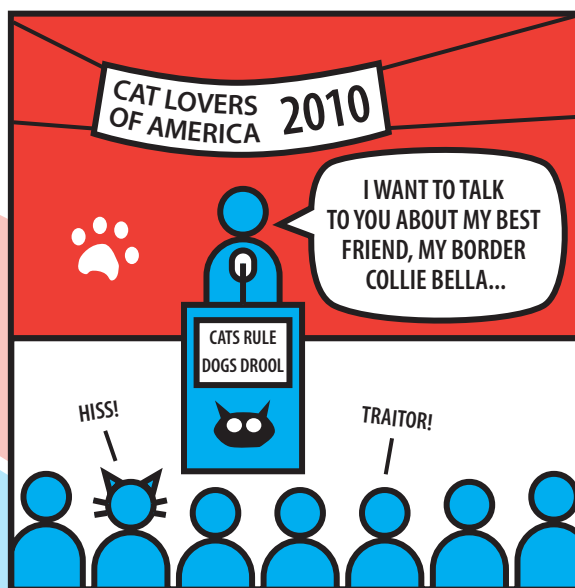
When giving your speech it is important to know who you are speaking to, and what they need to hear from you. As a youth who has experienced a child serving system you can provide a lot of valuable information to a large variety of people so it is very important to know who is in the room when you are speaking and why they are there. Therefore one of the first questions you want to ask is "Who is my audience?" Talk about things that are relevant to the people in the room. For example if you are speaking to members of your state legislature be sure to talk about specific policies and how they did or could have improved your situation. You may have a great story about how your parents advocated for you at your school but don't share it unless it's relevant.

### *Study Your Topic!*

Many young advocates are asked to talk about their personal experiences. Now you might think that because you know what happened in your life you really don't need to study it before you talk about it but nothing could be more wrong. It is very important that you organize your thoughts and that you remain consistent and on point. Also by studying your topic and identifying certain policies and procedures and how they affected your life you can make a very strong point and inspire decision makers to make

changes. Make sure that you have a clear motive to your speech as well. Don't tell your story unless it serves a purpose. Make sure you give your audience something to do once your speech is over. This could be anything from getting them to think about things from a different perspective to encouraging them to vote a certain way on a piece of legislation.

### *Tips When Giving a Speech!*

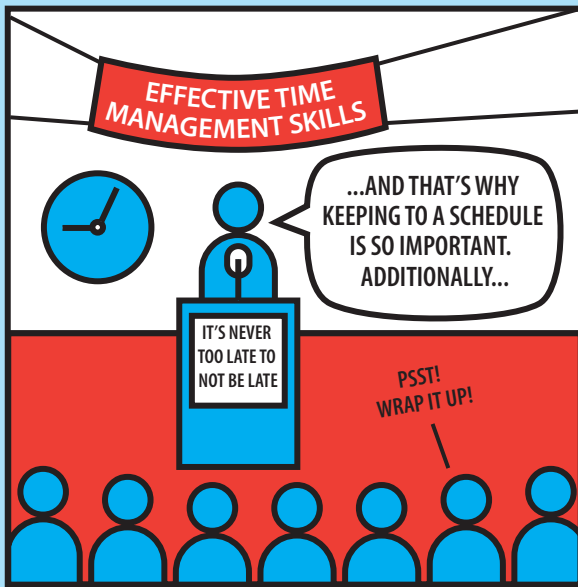


### KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE! STUDY YOUR TOPIC!

1. Know how long you have to speak and keep to that time. This might mean you have to cut some things out of your speech but it's important not to go over because it throws things off schedule.
2. Give your speech an easy to remember theme. This will create a foundation for your speech and help your audience remember its content.
3. Use index cards as cue cards to write out the outline of your speech for you to refer too. You only want to write the main idea or the first few words of a sentence. DO NOT write out your whole

speech—you are more inclined to simply read it and you won't be engaging your audience.

4. Engage your audience. People are more likely to listen when they feel like you are talking to



**KEEP TO THE TIME!  
PRACTICE YOUR SPEECH!**

them and not at them. So maintain eye contact with your audience members as much as possible. Also use visual aids, as they can help you deliver your speech more effectively as well as hold your audience's attention.

5. Dress appropriately, make sure you look professional—this will help you maintain your credibility.
6. Speak with conviction, stand up straight, and speak loudly so that the people in the back of the room can hear you too.
7. Include humor when appropriate. It's important that your audience enjoys hearing you speak. But don't overdo it—you're not doing a standup routine.

8. Use pauses to help you emphasize important concepts or information. Pause for just a second or two before saying your important thought and then pause for a few more seconds to give your audience time to process the information.

### *Practice*

The most important thing that you can do is practice! Practice your speech every chance you get. Do it while you are getting ready in the morning or when you are driving. It is also a good idea to practice in front of a mirror or a group of friends; this will provide you with valuable feedback to make your speech more dynamic. In addition, practicing will help you get more comfortable with your speech, and prevent you from making mistakes. Being comfortable with your speech is very important and one thing that will also help you do this is learning about how to safely and effectively share your story.



**ENGAGE YOUR AUDIENCE!  
DON'T WRITE OUT YOUR  
WHOLE SPEECH!**

## SAFELY SHARING YOUR STORY

**T**here are lots of very positive reasons as to why you should share your stories and experiences. Many service providers, funders, and decision makers want to know how effectively they are meeting the

needs of youth that are in a similar situation to what you have experienced. By telling these people about your experience you can help them develop better practices and guide positive changes in policies and services.

However there are many reasons why you should be careful when sharing your story. Telling people about difficult times in your life can often bring up painful memories, and negatively impact your mental wellbeing. It can also cause people to assume things about you based on your past and can even strain some relationships. However, just as there are skills that you can learn to be a better public speaker, you can also learn skills to help you be safer and more effective in sharing your story.

### *Risks of Telling Your Story*

There are a few things that you need to be aware of before you start sharing your experiences with other people. First, sometimes what you say can become public knowledge. The experiences that you share can be very powerful and motivating and people may decide to share those experiences with others. So be careful about what you say. For example, if you are trying to build a relationship with a relative don't talk about mistakes that they might have made in the past—this could get back to them and hurt your efforts to reconnect.

Second, things sometimes get out in the media. If that happens, people you are friends with or are even interested in dating could find out very personal details about you before you are ready to tell them. This could even affect employment. For example, if a company is interested in hiring you and they do a Google search of your name and find an article you wrote for a local newspaper about living with depression and anxiety it could deter them from hiring you.

Third, you have to think about how telling your story could affect you emotionally. Sometimes telling your story to people can be very empowering. It's nice to have people listen to what you have to say. It's also

nice to be the center of attention and be in the spotlight, but this can be very addicting and can also hurt you. Talking about difficult or painful experiences on a regular basis can wear you down emotionally. It's very important that you don't turn public speaking engagements into a form of therapy. Opening yourself up and not receiving any therapeutic supports in return can cause further difficulties with your overall mental health. As you are doing your advocacy work it is always a good idea to see a counselor and talk about things. If for any reason you feel the need to take a break then do so—you need to take care of your own wellbeing first.

### *What's Your Comfort Level*

Now that you know the risks involved it is time to make a decision about whether or not to share your story as an advocate. If you have decided that you do want to, it is important that you firmly establish a comfort zone. This involves determining who you feel comfortable sharing your story with and what you feel comfortable sharing. Also remember the purpose of sharing your story is to promote changes. Just make sure that these are changes that YOU believe in—don't let people take advantage of your experiences.

To do this you first need to make sure that you agree with and fully understand the reason that you are sharing your experiences with other people. Sometimes people might ask you to speak at an event and support a certain cause. Make sure that you understand and fully support their idea. If for any reason you don't feel comfortable with it, don't do it! Finally, identify the people that will be in the room and assess how you feel about them knowing personal details about your life.

## MOVING FORWARD

**T**hroughout this guide you have learned various skills that will help you grow and develop as an advocate. You now have a better idea of where to include your voice on policy development, you have gained important public speaking skills, and you have learned how to keep yourself safe when sharing your experiences with others. The most important thing that you can take from this guide is to understand that your voice is important. Make sure that you use it to improve the lives of others facing similar experiences, but only if you're ready to do so. The best way to develop these skills even better is to practice them! Don't let fear prevent you from taking action. Practice builds confidence. Many youth across the country have been driving changes in policies with their stories and you can too. So get out there, use these newfound skills and become a youth policy advocate so that you can start shaping history today!

# THANK YOU!

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