

Phase One

Get Started



Phase One, Get Started, includes the foundational steps to conducting a successful youth count. Thinking through the logistical aspects of the youth count at the outset will allow you to prioritize your energy on youth and community engagement and recruitment during the planning process.

In Phase One, you will establish and convene a Leadership Team. The Leadership Team is a small group of well-connected individuals, whose varying expertise is important to planning a youth count, including experience with homelessness or housing instability, and knowledge of the municipal system, the continuum of care and the provider system. The Leadership Team oversees all aspects of the planning process, makes decisions about logistics, and develops initial recommendations about how to organize and engage youth and providers in the youth count planning process. The Leadership Team manages the youth count process to ensure that all planning steps happen and the youth count is conducted successfully.

During the Initial Leadership Team Meeting, which is Step Two of this Phase, the Leadership Team identifies the broader community of stakeholders, the Stakeholder Team, with connections to the diversity of young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability in the community. The Stakeholder Team participates in meetings to review and finalize the plans for organizing and engaging youth and providers in the youth count planning process, and is actively involved in recruitment and implementation of the youth count. The Stakeholder Team ensures that the youth count plans are inclusive and reflect the diversity of youth experiences, and leverage their relationships to support youth participation in the planning and conducting of the youth count.

Phase One is the first phase of the Voices of Youth Count Toolkit. We encourage you to review the entire [Toolkit](#), where you can find more information about conducting a Youth Count using the VoYC approach.

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Step One: Establish the Leadership Team

Establish a Leadership Team Tools



□ [Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members](#)

Planning and conducting a successful youth count requires extensive outreach to, and engagement of, a wide array of community members at the outset of the planning process. We recommend creating two teams, a Leadership Team and a Stakeholder Team, to plan and execute the youth count. The Leadership Team will oversee all aspects of the planning process and engage the broader set of providers and community groups with connections to homeless and unstably housed youth. This larger group of stakeholders, the Stakeholder Team, will review and finalize the youth count plans and help recruit young people who reflect the diversity of experiences of homelessness and housing instability in the community to help plan and conduct the youth count.

The Leadership Team should reflect your community's expertise, including experience with homelessness, relationships with the broad array of service providers who work with youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability, organizing counts, and community infrastructure. We recommend reviewing the Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members as you think about the people to engage in the Leadership Team, and subsequently the Stakeholder Team.

If you are unfamiliar with service providers in the community, we encourage you to review the lists of HUD-funded and HHS-funded homeless services organizations in the area and contact the McKinney Vento Homeless Liaisons at local schools. The HUD-funded organizations can be found by reviewing the agencies included in your Continuum of Care's most recent [housing inventory count](#). The HHS-funded organizations can be found by looking at the [Family and Youth Services Bureau grantees](#).

The composition of your leadership team may vary depending on the size of your community and the existing infrastructure for serving youth.

The Leadership Team should include:

- A **project manager** who oversees the process and ensures that all steps are completed;
- A staff member from the **continuum of care** who can engage the breadth of the homeless-serving sector;
- An individual who helps organize the community's **point-in-time** count who has experience overseeing counts;
- A **service provider** who is well-connected and well-respected by the broader service provider community;
- A **senior municipal employee** who can get support and involvement from various municipal agencies (such as libraries, police and transit); and,
- **Young people** who have experienced homelessness or housing instability.

Step Two: Convene the Initial Leadership Team Meeting

Initial Leadership Team Meeting Tools



- [Initial Leadership Team Meeting Annotated Agenda](#)
- [Overview of VoYC Youth Count Process](#)
- [Voices of Youth Count Brief Youth Survey](#)
- [Youth Count Timeline Planning Tool](#)
- [Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members](#) (Phase One Step One)
- [Focus Group Planning Worksheet](#)

The Initial Leadership Team Meeting is a detailed planning session at which a draft plan for the overall youth count process and logistics are developed. The meeting will take approximately 2.5 hours, with additional time needed for follow up on the next steps identified during the course of the meeting. The meeting can also be broken up into multiple, shorter meetings, with one 90-minute meeting to plan the youth count logistics, and another 60-minute meeting to develop the youth compensation plan, identify the stakeholder team members and prepare for the focus groups.

The Initial Leadership Team Meeting should cover the following topics:

- ✓ Define **Who** to Count
- ✓ Determine **Where** to Count
- ✓ Determine **How** to Count
- ✓ Pick a **Survey** Tool
- ✓ Develop a **Timeline** for the Youth Count
- ✓ Plan the Tentative Youth Count **“Day-Of”** Schedule
- ✓ Identify **Deployment** Sites
- ✓ Develop the Youth **Compensation** Plan
- ✓ Identify the **Stakeholder Team** Members
- ✓ Prepare for the **Focus Groups**

Detailed guidance for conducting the Initial Leadership Team Meeting is included in the Initial Leadership Team Meeting Annotated Agenda. We discuss the decisions made for VoYC Youth Counts below.

Define **Who** to Count

The VoYC Youth Count focused on unaccompanied youth ages 13-25 experiencing homelessness or housing instability, including youth who are couch surfing, doubled up, staying with friends, , or involved in the sex trade, in addition to youth staying in shelters, transitional housing programs, staying in hotels/motels, sleeping in cars, or living on the street. We chose this target population so it was inclusive of the definitions used by the federal agencies funding services for homeless youth: the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). The age range matches the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which guides HHS funding, and is similar to the definition of homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Act, which guides DOE funding.

Determine **Where** to Count

The VoYC Youth Counts counted and surveyed youth in three ways: a Street Count, an Organizational Count, and “Come and Be Counted” Locations. We used this multiple location strategy to reach the diversity of youth we were trying to count—both youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

Determine **How** to Count

The VoYC Youth Counts gathered data in two ways: a Visual Count and a Brief Youth Survey. During the Visual Count, the Guides documented perceived information about the youth they encountered who they believed to be homeless or unstably housed and between the ages of 13-25. During the Brief Youth Survey, Guides approached the same young people to complete a survey, gathering information about the characteristics of youth (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation), current living circumstances, histories of foster care and justice system involvement, school and employment status, and pregnancy and parenting status.

We found pros and cons to each method:

The Visual Count ensured that all youth could be counted, even those who were sleeping or left the area before being surveyed. The Visual Count also allowed the teams to count youth who they were unable to approach for safety or other reasons. However, we also found that many of the youth the teams counted and subsequently surveyed were not homeless or unstably housed or were not in the age range of youth we were attempting to count. Youth who are experiencing homelessness or housing instability are often not visually distinguishable from youth who are stably housed.

The Brief Youth Survey allowed the teams to gather information about youth and confirm their housing status. However, at times, youth left the area before our teams could conduct surveys and youth were not always interested in completing the surveys when approached.

Therefore, we found it critical to use both approaches. One of the major lessons learned from the VoYC Youth Counts is that it is important to conduct a survey in tandem with the visual count in order to gain a more accurate and complete understanding of who the youth counted are and their living situations.

For the VoYC Youth Counts, the teams consisted of young people who have experienced homelessness or housing instability, referred to as Guides, and provider staff or community volunteers, referred to as Team Leaders. The Guides conducted the Youth Count, making decisions about who to count and survey, and the Team Leaders provided transportation and logistical support. Using a peer-driven approach was central to the VoYC Youth Count approach and was vital for their success.

Pick a **Survey** Tool

For the VoYC Youth Counts, we used a Brief Youth Survey comprised of just 16 questions. In designing the survey and making decisions about how to administer it, we balanced a concern for the comfort of the youth being surveyed and the Guides conducting the survey so that we gathered the most important information.

The survey was framed as a survey about housing experiences, not homelessness. We did not want the youth who were surveyed to think they had been selected because someone believed they were homeless and because youth often do not identify as being homeless.

We also asked Guides to complete full surveys with everyone they approached, even if the responses indicated they were likely stably housed.. The Street Count teams often approached groups of youth to ask them to do surveys. In case youth discussed the experience of being surveyed with their peers after the fact, we wanted them all to be asked the same questions so that youth did not think they were singled out because of their housing status. Having the Guides administer the survey in the same way for everyone also made it easier to do and improved the data quality.

We sequenced the questions so that the most important information, the youth's age and housing status, were asked first, and the questions we thought would be most sensitive, about gender identity and sexual orientation, were asked last.

We tested our survey with young people in some of our partner communities before using it for the first Youth Count to make sure that the questions and response options were understandable.

Note: If you are conducting a youth count during your annual HUD Point-in-Time, you will need to modify the VoYC Survey tool because it does not collect all of the information that [HUD requires](#) to be reported.

Develop a **Timeline** for the Youth Count

The VoYC Youth Count timeline was developed by first identifying the date(s) of the Youth Count. When determining the Youth Count date(s), we ensured there were no conflicts with local festivals and events. Very few Youth Counts were held on Fridays because of concerns about Guide and volunteer recruitment for the Youth Count. We then worked backward from the date of the Youth Count to determine when to hold the focus groups and planning activities.

Most of the VoYC Youth Counts were planned and executed over 10-12 weeks. This timeline can be compressed or extended if needed, but we recommend that there is no more than 5 weeks between focus groups and the youth count to ensure that the information that is gathered during the focus groups is as current as possible.

The Youth Count Timeline Planning Tool is provided to assist in this process.

Having selected the date for the youth count, we encourage you to send a save-the-date to volunteers who can help conduct the youth count, such as volunteers who have helped with the HUD PIT Count, or volunteers connected to provider organizations.

Plan the Tentative Youth Count **“Day-Of”** Schedule

The VoYC Youth Counts were conducted in a single 24-hour period, with multiple shifts of teams deployed during the Youth Count. Most communities used fewer, longer shifts to reduce the number of volunteers

needed to implement the Youth Count. Street Count teams who had to do a lot of walking often needed a mid-shift break to rest and get more food to eat.

Identify **Deployment Sites**

We determined the number of deployment sites based on the geographic size of the count area, accessibility to transportation, and traffic concerns, as well as safety considerations. We limited the number of deployment sites, finding it helpful to have more people coming to a fewer number of locations in case fewer, or different, people than expected showed up to participate in the youth count. Organizations that already have 24-hour staff were often the best able to offer space in the early morning and late evening.

Develop Youth **Compensation Plan**

The success of the VoYC Youth Count hinged on having young people with current or recent experience of homelessness or housing instability participate in the planning and execution of the count. Providing financial compensation for their time and expertise was essential to the successful and sustained engagement of youth in count efforts. In addition to the financial compensation, the training and experience provided youth with an important professional development opportunity. Youth were paid \$10/hour, and provided transportation assistance, food and snacks during all VoYC activities.

Youth who completed a Brief Youth Survey were provided a \$5 gift card. We selected the gift cards based on input from the young people who participated in the focus groups. The incentive amount was selected to be appealing, while not so substantial that youth felt they may be coerced into completing the survey.

Identify the **Stakeholder Team Members**

For the VoYC Youth Counts, we used the Potential Leadership Team and Stakeholder Team Members document to think about the types of stakeholders to include in the planning efforts to ensure the diversity of youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability were reflected in the Youth Count.

When recruiting organizations, we found it equally important to identify the right people: program staff were more likely to have direct connections and knowledge about the young people who participated in the VoYC Youth Counts.

Often, young people are not connected to traditional homeless services agencies, but instead are receiving support from youth-services organizations, religious institutions or other community organizations that need to be engaged.

Prepare for the **Focus Groups**

The focus groups are facilitated meetings to learn about where youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability spend time from the people most knowledgeable about them—young people and the service providers who support them. For the VoYC Youth Counts, we found it helpful for the Leadership Team to prepare a proposed plan in advance of the Focus Group Planning Meeting, allowing the Stakeholder Team to spend most of its time

developing a recruitment plan to ensure the focus groups were representative of the diversity of youth experience in the community.

We used the Focus Group Planning Worksheet to track the Leadership Team's proposed plan, which we then updated during the Focus Group Planning Meeting.

We found it helpful to have different perspectives in the focus groups, as it generated hot spots that may have otherwise been overlooked. We only held focus groups for specific subpopulations (such as trans/gender non-conforming youth) when we were concerned about safety. We also found it helpful to hold focus groups at provider locations, such as drop-in centers, where youth were already congregating because we could recruit additional youth at the last minute if we had low turn-out despite recruitment efforts. 🌈

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