

---

## Case Study in Advocacy: How National Youth Serving Agencies Came Together to Help Government Create the Prime Minister's Youth Council

Title: Case Study in Advocacy: How National Youth Serving Agencies Came Together to Help Government Create the Prime Minister's Youth Council

Author: Rachel Gouin and Myna Kota

Published in: *The Philanthropist*, Policy Advocacy

ISSN: 2562-1491

Date: April 27, 2020

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2020/04/case-study-in-advocacy-how-national-youth-serving-agencies-came-together-to-help-government-create-the-prime-ministers-youth-council/>

Date of PDF Download: June 3, 2020

*This is the third piece [in a new series](#) about advocacy work in our sector.*

Four years ago, 20 youth-serving organizations collaborated to create and shape a small piece of public policy: the [Prime Minister's Youth Council](#). It is not an earth-shattering achievement or priority, to be sure, but our efforts provide useful lessons for how organizations can take advantage of small policy opportunities in the current context of a minority government.

These are often referred to as “policy windows” – a political science theory that argues advocates can influence policy change by taking advantage of a favourable political climate, a problem definition, or a policy solution (Kingdon, 1995).

Election 2015 provided a favourable political climate: the Liberal platform included a promise to create the first Prime Minister's Youth Council; young voters were deemed largely responsible for electing the new majority government; Prime Minister Trudeau had named himself Canada's first Minister for Youth and also appointed a Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Youth; and the Prime Minister's written directions to his cabinet ministers confirmed that he wanted youth to be a priority.

At the time, a group of youth-serving agencies that had been meeting for more than a decade

---

was ready to advocate together for greater and more meaningful youth engagement. This loose coalition of National Youth Serving Agencies (NYSAs) collectively reached more than 5.6 million children, youth, and their families each year, in communities across Canada. It included the two agencies we represented at the time: Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada and Girl Guides of Canada.

CEOs and executive directors regularly met to discuss sector-wide issues, share promising practices, and execute solutions through partnerships. Policy staff from these organizations were either at the table or brought in when opportunities to take joint action arose. Without funding or staff, NYSA relies on the energy, time, and will of those around the table. While each organization had its own priority areas of focus, one reality was clear: we always had consensus around the issue of youth engagement – in terms of its role and importance in policy development, and the extent to which advocacy on this issue was a priority.

To introduce ourselves to the new government, the NYSA presented our best recommendations to the Prime Minister related to the creation of his youth advisory council. In January 2016, a small cohort of policy staff from NYSA member organizations co-created a policy paper for the new government. We reached out to staff from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and to then Parliamentary Secretary Peter Schiefke to inform them of our plans. We learned that they would welcome our advice, especially if it came quickly, as they were already in the planning phase for the youth council. We also met with backbench, young, and newly elected MPs, who we knew would be influential on the youth file. Government had a problem, albeit a small one, and we were able and willing to help.

Policy staff assigned to this effort invited all NYSA organizations to share their recommendations and best practices on working with youth, setting up and running youth councils, and incorporating youth voice into organizational decision-making. We then collated and edited everyone's input and prepared a coherent policy document with key recommendations that were universal to our collective experiences. To our delight (and surprise) all organizations met the tight deadline and provided prompt feedback on a draft brief. We made changes to the draft until all members agreed to endorse it and include their logo. Eight weeks later, document in hand, we requested a meeting and presented our best advice to PMO staff and Schiefke.

This wasn't the first time the NYSA collaborated on a joint initiative. In years past, the group coordinated efforts to increase the health, social, and economic outcomes of youth programs. It also wasn't the first instance of joint advocacy: in the spring of 2015, NYSA members collaborated on a first advocacy day on Parliament Hill, meeting with MPs to ask that they engage youth in the lead-up to the federal election. This simple ask easily produced consensus among NYSA members: it was a straightforward request for elected officials and an excellent pilot on joint advocacy. Not all NYSA members took part, but 10 or so did, and it built trust for future advocacy and an opportunity that would arise only a few months later.

In setting up its Youth Council, government would presumably have consulted with organizations or incorporated the advice of its own research and policy advisors. By proactively providing information and recommendations at the right moment, NYSA members made it easier, ensuring the government had the information it needed from those who have the right experience because they work on youth issues everyday. Any one NYSA member on its own would not have had the same influence: our power was rooted in collaboration.

---

Privy Council Office staff later confirmed that our policy brief had been instrumental in the creation of the Youth Council. This effort profiled NYSA organizations as helpful partners in implementing the government's youth priorities. We also demonstrated our ability and desire to work together on common goals. The government later invited several NYSA members to help shape and pilot its Canada Service Corps for youth and the country's first youth policy.

*The Philanthropist* previously published a [series of articles](#) on the non-profit sector's moral obligation to help develop public policy; and in the lead-up to the 2019 election, sector leaders outlined a range of [policy priorities](#). Where possible, they should consider ways to collaborate in advocating for these. As they do, the lessons from our experience may be useful. While there was little time to strategically note these at the time, in hindsight we can identify four factors that contributed to our success:

1. We relied on the trust that had been developed among executive leaders of the NYSA and their policy staff;
2. We expanded on a consensus position we had previously developed and advocated for together – in this case, the importance of effective and meaningful youth engagement;
3. We convened executive leaders and policy staff at the same time, combining decision-making power with the capacity to deliver on decisions in a nimble and timely way; and
4. We made a strong connection between government priorities and the mission and expertise of NYSA members and commissioned a short poll to demonstrate broad public support for action.

These factors are especially relevant today. This minority government is addressing the biggest challenge Canada has faced in a generation and non-profit organizations that were already stretched too thin are under increased pressure to respond. Collaboration makes sense. Granted, finding common ground is not always easy, but today we are seeing organizations rely on relationships, trust, and common priorities to propose actionable policy solutions to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations are responding to political priorities that intersect with their own mandates and with those of their non-profit peers. Most importantly, non-profits are sharing the work involved in advocating, in rallying support, and in illustrating, for government, the benefit of working collaboratively to implement useful policy ideas.

Taking advantage of policy windows is easier if consensus and trust already exist. Advocacy efforts under minority governments and in crisis situations favour those who are already organized as well as those who can collaborate beyond their own individual brands, with both political and public service officials, and across party lines.