



# OUR VOICES MATTER IN OUR COMMUNITIES

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## A YouthACT Policy Brief

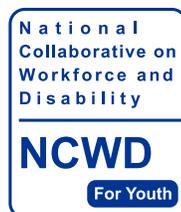
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The Youth Action Council on Transition (YouthACT) is a national initiative to get more youth with disabilities and their allies involved as leaders who partner with adults and organizations to improve opportunities for youth to succeed in life. "Transition" is the process and period of change that youth go through to become adults. Transition typically occurs between ages 12 and 25. During transition, youth need a variety of opportunities and supports to learn and develop skills and experience, set and

achieve goals, and make personal decisions about school, work, and life.

Too often, youth don't have a voice when agencies and organizations are deciding what youth services and opportunities to offer. It is important for agencies and organizations to hear from youth about what they need and want during the transition years so they can provide the right opportunities, services, and supports. For this reason, YouthACT aims to increase positive youth-adult partnerships where

young people and adults work together, share power, and support and learn from each other to build stronger communities.



In 2016, YouthACT participants moderated the YouthACT Transition Truths National Online Dialogue. Youth with disabilities ages 13–25 and allies of the disability community actively participated in this national online dialogue. Now we, YouthACT, have selected two priority areas that emerged from this conversation to share with you—the policymakers.

### **Priority 1: Advocacy and Self-Advocacy**

We want you to know:

- ◆ All youth, including those with disabilities and those at risk of leaving school early, must learn to advocate for themselves in secondary and postsecondary schools, workplaces, and the community.
- ◆ Youth want to learn about their human, educational, and civil rights and about how they can self-advocate for their rights.

We want you to support policies and take the following actions to ensure we can understand and advocate for our own rights:

- ◆ Support legislation that ensures youth can develop and practice advocacy and self-advocacy skills and understand their individual rights and responsibilities before transitioning from high school.

- ◆ Support legislation that ensures youth learn about their human, educational, and civil rights and the connection of that knowledge to self-advocacy before transitioning from high school.

### **Priority 2: Voting and Community Engagement**

We want you to know that:

- ◆ Youth, including those with disabilities, want to participate actively in voting and volunteering because their civic engagement strengthens their local communities.
- ◆ Schools should create and adopt curricula on inclusive, diverse communities and disability culture and history to benefit all students with and without disabilities.
- ◆ Public schools should adopt requirements for providing all youth with access to volunteering and service learning opportunities.

We want you to support policies and take the following actions that ensure we are positively and successfully included, integrated, and engaged in our local communities:

- ◆ Require all public schools to offer coursework on inclusive, diverse communities, disability culture,

and the history of the disability rights movement for all students.

- ◆ Adopt volunteering graduation requirements that all youth with and without disabilities can achieve through service learning and in-school and out-of-school volunteering.
- ◆ Increase the representation of youth and adults with disabilities in TV, radio, online, and print media and ad campaigns, particularly through actors and voice actors with disabilities.
- ◆ Support new legislation that increases the representation and participation (i.e., voting, serving on boards and councils, etc.) of people with disabilities in the community.

### Alexandra “Sasha” Fursman’s Story



I began volunteering at the Minnesota Association for Children’s Mental Health

when I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. It was not a school related program or connection; I had just been passing by their building and decided it would be interesting to volunteer somewhere in a field that I had no knowledge about—mental health.

In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I started going to community college full-time and had more free time to volunteer since I had a flexible schedule. I began working 10 hours a week for \$10 an hour doing basic database entry and answering phones. As time went on, and I worked there longer, I gained more skills and was given more responsibilities by the time I graduated high school (nine months ago). I am currently a junior in college due to finishing my first two years of college in high school. I now work 30-40 hours a week, go to school full-time as a business finance major (something I never would have done before), and have been promoted to conference coordinator assistant with a 50 percent raise (now \$15/hour) over the last two years.

If I had never volunteered and moved my way up the ladder, I would not have the competitive skills I have now in the job force. With the skills I learned at my job because of volunteering, I am now able to personally contract to private companies to create registration systems and build out websites—skills I would have otherwise never learned.

I am a strong advocate for mandating volunteering and ensuring all young people have the opportunity to volunteer and be engaged in their communities.

Realistically, even with students who have afterschool activities, sports or AP courses, there is no excuse to not give up a few hours a month to support your community and start building a foundation of work-based skills and a professional network. When I look at my peers today, the most successful ones are those who either volunteered or had a job or internship in a professional field. This mandate does not have to be a strenuous requirement, but rather a few hours here and there that improves the community and builds a higher skilled workforce.

## Our Vision

We aim for this brief to increase your efforts to involve all youth actively as partners in all decisions that shape and affect our lives. Use this brief to support your work with all youth to foster policy changes promoting effective community engagement, including advocacy, understanding of disability life experiences, and improved media portrayals.



The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. NCWD/Youth is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. To obtain this publication in an alternate format, please contact us at 877-871-0744 toll free or email [contact@ncwd-youth.info](mailto:contact@ncwd-youth.info). This Info Brief was written by YouthACT and Jennifer Thomas. All NCWD/Youth publications are posted on the NCWD/Youth website at [www.ncwd-youth.info](http://www.ncwd-youth.info). NCDW/Youth is funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL), Office of Disability Employment Policy (Number #OD-23804-12-75-4-11). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the USDOL. Individuals may produce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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