



Vancouver Foundation's

# Youth Engagement Report

Learning from Fostering Change  
and Fresh Voices

April 2018

vancouver  
foundation  
COMMUNITY INSPIRED

fostering  
CHANGE

FRESH VOICES

## When I joined Vancouver Foundation in 2013, I knew our Grants and Community Initiatives team was on to something with their youth-focused work.

**As an incoming CEO, I felt it was important to help this team fully realize the aspirations so well articulated by the youth that were, even then, clearly at the centre of these initiatives.** As we look back, we are proud of what Fresh Voices and Fostering Change accomplished.

It is important to recognize that these initiatives are not examples of “strategic philanthropy” as characterized by a foundation surveying the landscape, finding an issue and deciding to “do something about it.” Rather, this was community-based, organic philanthropy where the actions taken were the result of listening and working in concert with those who live and experience the “issue” daily.

Community-inspired philanthropy requires a great degree of humility. Our team was continuously learning about how to keep youth at the centre of the work. We came to understand that we needed to change within our organization while we were trying to bring about social change. Every step in the process was a capacity building opportunity, not just for youth but for the Foundation as well. This report outlines the winding path including some of the wrong turns we made. We are still learning.

I believe that with the right mind-set, foundations can be effective hosts and supporters for youth engagement, policy advocacy and systems change initiatives. It all starts from the recognition that engaging community members with lived experience is essential to creating communities where all belong and all succeed.



**Kevin McCort**  
President and CEO  
Vancouver Foundation

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**Facilitation, research and writing:** Juniper Glass, LumiereConsulting.ca

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# Introduction

**The purpose of this report is to gather what has been learned about hosting deep youth engagement initiatives as a community foundation.**

Many foundations, funders and nonprofit organizations have approached Vancouver Foundation over the years wanting to know more about its role in Fresh Voices, Fostering Change, and youth engagement in general. This report is a result of those questions and the Foundation's commitment to be part of a philanthropic field that reflects on its practice and shares knowledge freely.

**Fostering Change and Fresh Voices were very different initiatives but the insights and practices that emerged were often similar.** The learning came about through both successes and challenges. Vancouver Foundation has approached this undertaking with humility, not pretending to have all the answers. There are many more insights beyond what appears in this report, which youth and program staff carry with them as wisdom into their new endeavours.

The report is based on knowledge gathered in spring 2018 from youth advisory members, adult allies, board directors, and partner organizations and grantees. Feedback from current and former staff was also generated from several teams within Vancouver Foundation: executive, programs, communications, donor services and operations. Many funders and foundations also contributed to the needs assessment to determine what would be most helpful to share with the field. Thank you for your time and insights.

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# FRESH VOICES

“Fresh Voices was influential in shaping the understanding of decision-makers in school districts and the provincial government. They changed the story of newcomer youth to one grounded in community pride and connections.” - Staff member

“Fresh Voices has proven its value and importance, not only through its campaigns but through the growth and self-confidence of the youth that take part. They have supported a movement of newcomer youth across B.C.” - Community partner

**Fresh Voices is a group of refugee and immigrant youth, age 14 to 24, working to make B.C. a better place for young newcomers, through public engagement, advocacy, research and partnerships.**

Fresh Voices emerged from a collaboration between Vancouver Foundation and B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth (RCY). The Foundation had built experience in youth engagement through its Youth Philanthropy Council and Youth Vital Signs. When RCY asked for assistance convening newcomer youth to plan a policy forum focused on their realities, the Foundation was able to draw on its network of young leaders from diverse backgrounds and community partners. The 2011 forum brought decision-makers together with over 100 immigrant and refugee youth. To support the momentum from the conference and fill gaps in leadership opportunities for newcomer youth, Vancouver Foundation continued hosting the initiative. Since then, the Foundation has supported the Fresh Voices Youth Advisory Team with significant time, energy, ideas and funds to bring together immigrant and refugee youth, listen to them, and empower them to address issues that affect their lives.

As of March 2018, PeerNetBC, a charitable organization that provides professional advice and resources to peer-led groups, will provide an organizational home as Fresh Voices embarks on its next chapter as a fully youth-led initiative.



## What we accomplished together 2011-2017

The Fresh Voices Youth Advisory Team worked with Vancouver Foundation to make some great progress:

- **over 1,000 immigrant and refugee youth brought together** to discuss programs and policies that affect newcomer youth and recommend improved policies and practices
- **meeting with the Federal Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship** to discuss removing transportation loans for Government Assisted Refugees and improving family reunification policies
- successfully renaming English as a Second Language to **ELL (English Language Learning)**, and continuing advocacy for ELL class graduation credits through the Make it Count campaign
- facilitation of the **Syrian Youth Refugee Consultation** in partnership with Immigrant Services Society of BC to capture refugee youth experiences within the first 100 days of settling in Canada
- **Fresh Voices Awards** for immigrant youth, by immigrant youth, to recognize the contributions of young newcomers, in partnership with Vancity Credit Union, Michaelle Jean Foundation, TELUS and MOSAIC B.C.
- **research on the physical, social and economic mobility of newcomer youth** in the metro-Vancouver region, including provincial policy recommendations
- **LostVotesYVR**, a public education and engagement campaign to extend municipal voting rights to permanent residents in Vancouver
- **Fresh Voices Speaker Series** to highlight the voices and experiences of newcomers
- **Grants to school districts** to advance young people's ELL education priorities

## Annual Budget

### Program Budget

\$277,400

(excluding grants and staff; 2017)

### Grants

\$150,000

supporting

8 COMMUNITY GROUPS

## Human Resources

### Youth Advisory Team

15 youth

6 adult allies

### Fresh Voices staff

2.5 FTE

(Director, Manager,  
Grant administrator)

### Additional support provided by Foundation staff:

Communications, Finance,  
Donor Services, and VP, Grants &  
Community Initiatives

**External consultants provided expertise in:** policy research, community organizing, communications & branding, and anti-oppression.

# fostering CHANGE

“Fostering Change is the best example I can point to of grassroots organizing and public policy campaigning in BC in the last five years.”  
- City Councillor

“Fostering Change was a real game changer and landscape changer. It created culture shifts: in people’s attitudes towards youth aging out of foster care, and in the relationships among funders and community groups.” – Community partner and grantee



**Fostering Change is an initiative to improve policy, practice and community connections for young people in B.C. transitioning from foster care to adulthood.**

**Vancouver Foundation had been making grants for many years to reduce homelessness.** Consultations with communities, policy makers and research pointed to the need for upstream solutions. Since far too many homeless youth have been associated with the child welfare system, a new strategy was launched in 2012 with this vision: that every young person leaving foster care at age 19 would have the opportunities and support they need to thrive as adults.

**Fostering Change engaged a Youth Advisory Circle, young people age 19-24 with lived experience of foster care, who co-created and guided the strategic plan.** In addition to youth engagement, the initiative focused on grants to support nonprofits working with youth, public engagement to raise awareness and demonstrate public will, and research and learning to highlight opportunities for change. As of April 2018, Fostering Change is continuing its work hosted at First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, an alliance of 101 provincial and regional organizations who put children and youth first.

## What we accomplished together 2012-2017

The Fostering Change Youth Advisory Circle helped shift the landscape of support for youth aging out of foster care in BC:

- **\$5 million in grants** to community organizations created better connections and support for youth aging out of foster care
- Support provided to community organizations helped them improve their **youth engagement practices**
- **Public opinion surveys** showed that 92% of people across BC support their own children over age 19 and 76% believe supports should be expanded for foster care youth
- **Groundbreaking research** demonstrated that adverse experiences of youth from care cost communities up to \$268 million per year, while only \$57 million per year is needed to improve outcomes
- **Over 17,000 petition signatures** demonstrated that the public wanted to see action on this issue by government, business, and community
- **Candidates Pledge** to improve supports for youth aging out of foster care was signed by current and former Ministers for Children and Family Development, 41 MLAs, and 147 provincial election candidates
- **BC government recently made significant policy improvements** to the eligibility, amount and length of time former foster care youth can access financial support. The government will invest \$30 million in the program over three years starting in 2018-19

## Annual Budget

Program Budget

\$468,500

(excluding grants and staff; 2016)

Grants

\$901,869

supporting

19 COMMUNITY GROUPS

## Human Resources

Youth Advisory Circle

6 youth

3 adult allies

Fostering Change staff

3.5 FTE

(Director, Manager, Learning & Evaluation Lead, and Grant administrator)

**Additional support provided by Foundation staff:**

Communications, Finance, Donor Services, and VP, Grants & Community Initiatives

**External consultants provided expertise in:**

facilitation, public engagement, policy research, economics, public opinion research, campaign strategy, and Nationbuilder web platform training.

# Reflections on hosting social change initiatives as a foundation

1

**Inception:** Fresh Voices and Fostering Change intertwined youth engagement with policy advocacy, neither of which is a common activity for a funder. So why did Vancouver Foundation embark on this work in the first place? “We were granting in eight different fields of interest, province wide,” recalls a Foundation executive. “Grants were having a broad but maybe not a deep effect on any issue. We decided we wanted to have more of an impact on root causes.”

**Social license was critical for both initiatives.** It was important to make sure that enough stakeholders accepted the direction of the work and the Foundation’s role in it. For Fostering Change, the Foundation took on a role convening the field to address lack of supports for youth aging out of care, when no other organization seemed ready to do so. Fresh Voices emerged when the Youth Advisory Team wanted to continue working together after the first newcomer youth summit, and the Foundation partnered to provide resources and support.

““These initiatives both graduated from a set of other work and longstanding relationships that existed within the Foundation and in the community. They didn’t appear out of thin air; they were taking the work to another level.”  
- Staff member

2

**Implementation:** Once commitments to the programs were made, the Foundation had to provide adequate resources for the youth engagement and advocacy processes. This included finding the right people to manage the initiatives and accepting that it would take several years to make an impact. Each program had a dedicated budget that staff could direct as needed towards grants, training, activities, travel, consultants, and research. The Foundation also leveraged its visibility and relationships to amplify youth voices and advocate for policy change.

**The strategy needed space to grow.** Staff and youth tested and tried things out for a time before defining their strategy and theories of change. Trust and support from the executive was essential to allow a new way of working in the Foundation. At some points, however, program staff felt pressure from Foundation leadership to articulate a strategy when they were still in development or to stick to a plan instead of shifting when needed.

The Foundation was sometimes, but not always, flexible to adapt its policies and processes when they posed barriers for the initiatives, resulting in a disconnect at times between the organization’s values of youth engagement and inclusion and its internal practices. Unlike Fostering Change, Fresh Voices did not have a grants portfolio until its last program year and therefore was not connected to the board committee responsible for grantmaking, resulting in less flow of information and communication between this initiative and the board.

““It was critical to have leaders that would actually vouch for the initiatives to the board and support the direction of work, even when they were out of their comfort zone. The executive created a buffer, space for creativity and planning.”- Staff member

# 3

**Transition:** Just as it was important for the Foundation to step up and host programs when it was needed, board and leadership agreed that eventually the initiatives would wind down or transition elsewhere. They believed that since the Foundation needs to be viewed as an institution that supports a range of community issues, it could not focus indefinitely on certain programs.

### **Positioning Fostering Change and Fresh Voices as “initiatives of Vancouver Foundation”**

allowed these programs to have a unique identity that could one day become independent. At a certain point, the executive indicated that the programs would need to be moved away from the Foundation. They directed staff to observe the field and identify when the conditions would allow for a transition. Youth advisors discussed the pros and cons of independence versus being housed at an institution. As of spring 2018, both initiatives became hosted by other community organizations. The recent transition has been challenging for youth, staff and community partners alike, and Vancouver Foundation continues to reflect upon this process in a spirit of ongoing learning.

“Understand that if you ignite this process, youth will come. They will actively engage. Think carefully about the end point, so that you can manage expectations and ensure a transition plan.”  
- Community partner



## Strategic considerations for foundations

Vancouver Foundation’s experience points to key questions that can help funders assess readiness to host a community-engaged advocacy initiative.

1. **Is this a pressing community challenge that needs to be addressed?** Is a new initiative needed or simply more support to existing organizations?
2. **Are we in this for the right reasons?** Are we motivated to create a deeper impact to benefit the community, or to generate more visibility and funds?
3. **Is there no other logical host for the initiative?** Is there a need for a neutral convenor in this field?
4. **Does the foundation have knowledge and stakeholder buy-in to undertake this work legitimately?** Does the initiative build on past work, in the foundation and in the community?
5. **Will the initiative support an under-represented group to gain voice and power?** Are we creating space for community members that are not often heard?
6. **Can we demonstrate that we and the issue are non-partisan?** Can the issue be framed in a way that allows broad public and political support?
7. **Are we willing to put resources behind the initiative?** Can we dedicate adequate human and financial resources over the medium term (three to six years), including hiring staff?
8. **Are we willing to learn, shift internal practices and share power?** Will the initiative be a side project or will leadership ensure the whole organization supports it? Are we ready to be challenged on our usual way of working?

Lessons on ...

# Youth engagement

## 1 Involve youth early in the process, and keep them in the centre throughout the initiative.

**fostering CHANGE** : When the Foundation identified lack of supports for youth aging out of care as a major contributor to homelessness, the program team did not immediately come up with an action plan. Instead, they decided the strategy needed to start with foster care youth themselves. The Youth Advisory Circle was formed. For much of the first year, they built trust, gathered knowledge, learned how to engage in group dialogue and explored the issues. Investing deeply in youth early on meant that when it came time to set goals and create strategy, youth were full, informed partners.

- “The biggest advice I received came from a young person who said, ‘So often organizations decide what they are going to do, and then they invite youth in.’ Young people want to be involved early, in the thinking, the planning, the decision-making. If you think there’s an issue in the community, bring them on!” - Foundation executive
- “The board was confident that because the initiatives were youth-led, they understood the issues and had an approach that would work. We had confidence in the staff who had the trust and engagement of the youth.” - Board member

## 2 Be intentional about which youth are being engaged and why.

**Fresh Voices and Fostering Change focused on groups of youth that experienced exclusion and barriers to opportunity.** This is different than a general approach to youth engagement that imagines all youth are on a level playing field.

- “The people who have answers are the ones who are directly affected by the issue.” - Fostering Change youth advisor
- “Whose experience do you put at the centre? Not all young people are the same; they have different access to power. In Fresh Voices we gave priority to building power in racialized immigrant and refugee youth.” - Staff member
- “Vancouver Foundation tried to do everything it could to break financial barriers to access for young people.” - Fresh Voices youth advisor

## Practices

- Youth and staff create clear goals for the initiative
- Involve youth fully in building, implementing and adapting strategy and activities
- Terms of Reference: clarify responsibilities of youth advisory, adult allies, foundation
- Build shared work plans
- Be transparent about the extent of youth decision-making power in different situations
- Keep youth in the loop: Share information on budgets, workloads, timelines, administrative requirements
- Engage youth in problem solving about opportunities and constraints
- Ensure other staff (evaluation, communications, executive) get to know youth and work on shared tasks

## Accessibility

### Provide support to make it easier for youth to participate

- Food at meetings (healthy full meals, not just pizza!)
- Honoraria
- Transit tickets
- Meeting times that work for youth (it might be Friday evenings!)
- Variety of communication methods (graphic recording, silent reflection, sharing circles)
- Registration and travel to events and conferences
- Printed material for youth to review, rather than relying on electronic communications
- Individualized support (like assistance getting a passport to present at an out-of-country conference)

## 3 Acknowledge, don't ignore power.

**In order for youth to have a real say, they need to know what is going on.** Transparency about things like budgets, workloads, timelines, administrative requirements, concerns, and opportunities creates a habit of openness. Building mechanisms for regular communication when things are going well help ensure open channels when disagreements arise.

There can be reciprocity and respect even when there is a power imbalance. For example, if the organization needs to take the lead on an activity and would like youth involvement, it can show respect by sharing background information and being clear about how much youth input is possible.

This way of working takes time, dedication and patience, particularly on the part of youth engagement staff. Some of the most challenging situations staff experienced at Vancouver Foundation were having to tell youth that a certain decision was not theirs to make or not being available to give youth extra support because staff were too busy with other responsibilities of their position. Strong trusting relationships between youth and staff are essential to have these hard conversations.



**FRESH VOICES** : “Even when you are working on complex issues, you still need to find a simple message to share with the public and decision-makers,” a communications staff member reflected. Both initiatives had public campaigns that required prioritizing key messages and policy asks, but getting to clarity required an investment in time, capacity building and dialogue. Program staff and youth learned from communications staff and campaign consultants that “there had to be a balance between saying everything we wanted to say versus getting people to listen to us.” Sharing the power to define campaigns, although challenging, meant that youth, staff and the Foundation proudly championed them once they were launched.

“ “When it comes to marginalized communities, it’s tricky to figure out why people want to invest in you. For example, Fresh Voices could be seen as an advertisement for Vancouver Foundation, but the amount of money spent on us was a small fraction of the Foundation’s budget. Are they just doing this because the Foundation needs to fundraise? As youth, we need transparency and clear communication to make sure that our communities are not being tokenized.” - Fresh Voices youth advisor

## 4 Sharing power means sharing information and responsibility.

**It's not empowering for youth to say what they want and expect others to implement.** Nor is it empowering to get involved in a project only to be tokenized. The highest level of engagement is when adults and youth, community members and institutions are in it together: pooling knowledge and sharing responsibility to address challenges.

- “Youth step up when they ‘own it.’ They take responsibility for a project when they get to help make the tough decisions.” - Staff member
- “I am expected to come prepared because it is part of my commitment. Be clear on what's expected of the young people and what young people are expecting of the organization supporting them.” - Fostering Change youth advisor

**FRESH VOICES** : The Youth Advisory Team was involved in planning and delivering activities like the annual Fresh Voices Forum, to a certain extent. For example, staff provided a broad agenda for the Forum and then worked with youth to fill out program content. One youth advisor believed that “being given the agenda is not youth-driven. It would be helpful to know how it was developed and what kind of work that took.” Another YAT member wished that youth had both taken more responsibility rather than relying on staff (for example contacting elected officials and monitoring budgets) and held each other more accountable (for example staying informed and attending regularly). It was only when Fresh Voices was in its last year at the Foundation that youth realized how much staff time and financial resources were required to create their campaigns and events. Staff agreed that sharing information about constraints and coaching youth to take on more tasks would have strengthened young people's skills and engagement.

### The Ladder of Young People's

**Participation** has been a useful tool for both initiatives because it illustrates many possible levels of engagement. Sometimes the initiatives reflected true adult-youth partnership and sometimes they were operating on one of the lower rungs.

Adapted from: R. Hart. 1992. Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

- Rung 8:** Young people & adults share decision-making
- Rung 7:** Young people lead and initiate action
- Rung 6:** Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people
- Rung 5:** Young people consulted and informed
- Rung 4:** Young people assigned and informed
- Rung 3:** Young people tokenized
- Rung 2:** Young people are decoration
- Rung 1:** Young people are manipulated



## 5 Staff who build bridges between youth and the institution are the key to success.

**They must bring unique skills and life experience (and your usual hiring process might not find them).**

The program managers of Fostering Change and Fresh Voices had the professional skills to lead deep community engagement. They also knew from personal experience what it was like to be a foster kid or a migrant youth. Lived experience has a value that should not be overlooked, but it often is by foundations' hiring practices, for example, the requirement that staff have a university degree. Bringing in youth engagement staff initially on short contracts was a way to demonstrate the importance of their role before Vancouver Foundation committed to permanent positions.

“That is truly the secret to these initiatives: the effectiveness of our staff in authentically positioning young people at the centre.” - Foundation executive

“Hire people who understand our journeys.”  
- Fresh Voices youth advisor

## Seeking:

**A stellar youth engagement manager (the unofficial job posting)**

### Skills and experience

- Relatable to youth
- Lived experience of the issue
- Excellent coach and mentor
- Facilitation, program design and community organizing skills
- Confident working in institutional and community settings
- Knowledge of organizations and policies in the field
- A scout: Always on the lookout for opportunities to improve, connect, build
- Dedicated to both the process and the outcomes
- Persistent, patient, positive and self-aware
- University degree and prior foundation work experience not required

### Responsibilities

- Hold the vision of true adult-youth partnership
- Value the gifts in each young person
- Prepare youth to contribute fully
- Share the work with youth: Know when to step up and when to step back
- Be an intrapreneur: Assist the foundation to change from within
- Name challenges as they arise and collaborate to find solutions
- Teach adults how to engage respectfully and supportively with youth
- Be transparent
- Support the flow of information between youth, foundation and partners
- Make a multi-year commitment to build strong relationships

## 6 Youth engagement staff need to be well supported in order to support everyone else.

**Youth engagement staff work at the intersection:** between overall vision and daily practice; between adults learning to share power with youth and youth learning to work with an institution; between marginalized youth's realities and systems that were not built for them. As we all know, intersections can be hazardous unless safety measures are in place.

Foundations need to create supports that will allow youth engagement staff to do their best work: job security, decent pay, trust and openness with leadership, commitment to reduce barriers to youth within the organization, and efforts to ensure the youth program is understood and valued by all staff and board. Supervisory staff can also play an important role, coaching youth engagement staff who may not have prior experience working in a foundation to understand the institution's processes and expectations.

While Vancouver Foundation put most of these supports in place, they were not always constant throughout the initiatives. Tensions arose during both initiatives based on differing priorities and assumptions about the practice of youth engagement within the Foundation.

“It's hard work to hold. This is something for foundations to understand when bringing people on to do real community engagement. They are coming in deeply connected to these issues and communities. Foundations are trading on staff's credibility and relationships, whether they think about it or not. That is why it's essential to demonstrate that their work is respected throughout the organization, not pigeon-holed or minimized.” - Staff member

## 7 Respect the knowledge youth bring with them while supporting them to build new capacity they need to lead.

**Youth advisory members learned and built skills in many ways.** Each program had a dedicated training budget that youth could use for their learning priorities, such as group workshops in public policy or facilitation skills. Staff and adult allies also provided ongoing informal coaching. When youth presented at a conference or met with an elected official, program staff helped the group to prepare thoroughly so that they entered with confidence and a clear message.

“Real youth engagement is going that extra mile in making sure the young people are actually prepared and comfortable in the new settings that they are going to. Not just throwing them into a room and saying, 'Here you go!'”  
- Fostering Change youth advisor

“Fostering Change identified each young person's gifts and linked them up with mentorship that was meaningful and effective. That reflects an Indigenous concept because in our traditional community, you were identified for your gifts at a young age and mentored. The act of honouring young people is so profound for their development, for their sense of belonging, especially when they don't have a family.” - Community partner and grantee

## 8 In the youth advisory council, make time to get to know each other and to stay on track with the work.

**Youth advisory members were most proud of two things:** the relationships they built with each other and the achievements they accomplished together. Time in meetings needs to be accorded to both. Youth said it was especially important to make sure new youth advisors got support to learn about the group's history, goals and ways of working. Even youth who had been involved for a long time needed mechanisms to help them come back to goals and work plans so that the initiative stays on track.

“Being on the Youth Advisory Team provided us with so many learning opportunities, not only within the group but also by providing us with means to go to events and learn from other amazing work that people are doing.”  
- Fresh Voices youth advisor

“A youth-driven initiative, by its nature, captures youth in a moment of time. Young people engaged early on that take on more leadership will eventually 'graduate' and no longer be youth as defined by the project. New members joining the youth advisory council will need to go through their own learning process and may have different priorities. So this is an evolving, continuous capacity building process.”  
- Community partner



## Practices: Youth Capacity Building

- Informal coaching by staff and adult allies
- Dedicated budget for training
- Leadership skills workshops (facilitation, presentation skills, media relations, policy, conflict resolution, community engagement)
- Working alongside staff and consultants
- Financial support to attend conferences
- Field trips to learn from other initiatives
- Group retreats for planning and reflection
- Links to other leadership opportunities (in research, policy, community agencies)

## 9 Designated adult allies play a quiet but essential role in a youth advisory council, supporting young people to contribute to their fullest.

**Fostering CHANGE FRESH VOICES** : From the very beginning, each youth advisory included adult allies: people experienced working with youth and dedicated to the goals of the initiative. They attended all advisory meetings and received the same modest honoraria as youth members. Their role was to build trusting relationships with the youth and assist the group to learn, discuss and work together.

“My practice was to really engage youth members as knowledgeable people that deserve mentorship. They deserve to be treated as people who have capacity and ability and who are also there to learn. I asked a lot of questions and mediated what came up in the group as respectfully as I would with any other colleague.” -Fostering Change adult ally

Lessons on ...

# New narratives

## 1 Social change requires a change in story

**Both youth and the campaign experts brought in to support the initiatives agreed: stereotypes about foster kids and newcomer youth needed to change** if there was to be any progress on changing policies and practices that affect them.

In Fresh Voices and Fostering Change, it was important to build a positive narrative that worked for the young people who live these experiences, on their terms. While charities often use negative images to tug at the public's heart strings and wallets, like hopeless looking foster kids, youth and staff were determined to use a different approach. As one staff member said, "Sad images of marginalized youth might provoke a cheque-book response, but they won't provoke a policy response. And youth won't want to stick around, either. It's their stories. It's their lives."

**FRESH VOICES** : **Fresh Voices created spaces that invited the public in to learn about and celebrate the lives of migrant youth and families.** Annual Fresh Voices Awards shone light on refugee and immigrant youth making a positive difference in their communities. Fresh Voices youth advisors reviewed and made decisions on the nominations with adults from partnering organizations. My Mother's Home started as film and photography by migrant youth about their mothers and became a recurring event honouring the courage and beauty in newcomer families' experience.

“We supported migrant communities to really take ownership of themselves and their stories.”  
- Fresh Voices youth advisor



## Practices

- Build skills in story definition and storytelling
- Media training: how to talk to journalists
- Assist youth to prepare before media interviews and presentations
- Film, audio, interactive artworks
- Exhibitions, speaker series and events highlighting youth voices
- Awards to recognize youth contributing to the community
- Understand the audience: public opinion polls and message testing
- Key messages and communication guidelines
- Vetting process for journalists:
  1. Initial discussion with program manager
  2. Agree to terms (youth see text before publishing, choose photographs, give permission before stories used elsewhere)
  3. Pitch to youth advisory
  4. Approval by youth

## 2 Dedicate time to building the narrative that you want to tell – and that your audience will be able to hear.

**Youth took part in storytelling and workshops** and created videos, podcasts and written stories to reflect their real, whole lives. Staff and consultants with campaign and public relations skills supported youth to figure out how to connect their positive messages to values and ideas already held by the public. A key was finding something about the issue that the audience could relate to personally.

“*In both initiatives, we always told the story that held up the promise and the gift that young people offer the community, rather than their vulnerability or brokenness.*” - Staff member

**FRESH VOICES** : The Make it Count campaign evoked a common experience, being a student looking forward to graduation: “When a high school student in BC learns a new language, they get credit towards their graduation. Unless they’re an immigrant student learning English. Our hard work at school should be worth just as much as anyone else’s.”

**Fostering CHANGE** : The challenge was to shift public sentiment about youth in care from “those kids” to “our kids.” Public opinion polling found that most BC residents agreed that 19 year-olds did not have the necessary skills and resources to support themselves independently. Fostering Change piggybacked on widely-held parenting values to show that foster care youth deserved the same range of financial, housing and caring supports as other children entering adulthood.

## 3 Don’t stop at individual stories. To influence policy, connect the narrative to solutions: what needs to shift in the system.

**Stories have qualities that can make public policy more meaningful** for audiences. But it doesn’t help change systems if the story is left hanging without broader context and potential solutions. When youth shared personal experiences along with a clear policy ask, this powerful combination lit up the light of understanding in audiences, whether they were board members, policymakers, community partners, elected official or the media.

“*It’s important to engage young people to talk about the systemic issues and not just personal storytelling.*” - Fostering Change youth advisor

“*It’s fun when reporters realize that I can stand my ground. This issue is about all of us, not one of us.*” - Fostering Change youth advisor

**Fostering CHANGE** : Youth advisors worked hard to reframe the issues facing youth in care in the media: “Before we started, you would only see foster kids in the news when they died. Reporters would often come to us saying, ‘tell us your sad story.’ Eventually they realized that we wouldn’t talk to them unless we agreed with the angle. This inspired other news sources to think about their coverage: what are the effects on the community when the reporting is all negative? Now the stories are about how the system is changing for foster kids.”

Today, the media also see Fostering Change youth advisors as a resource: “A couple years after the first campaign ended, a journalist came to me and said, ‘I have this interesting story. How should I cover this issue?’ It’s so cool to see the change from how we started talking to the media in the beginning to where we are now.”

Lessons on ...

# Building public and political will

## 1 Youth can see many potential solutions. Prioritize, and get input from other system actors when choosing what to focus on.

**The good ideas generated by youth, such as Fresh Voices' 16 policy recommendations, are an important place to start.**

Influencing policy usually requires sustained effort on a small number of solutions, at the jurisdictional level that makes sense. "Shopping around" issues and solutions to get the advice of policymakers and other system actors can help focus and build advocacy strategies that move towards young people's vision.

“We had so much in our work plan. It is good to dream big but if there are not enough time and resources to act on all the ideas, this can lead to feelings of frustration that may not be productive.” - Fresh Voices youth advisor

“We did our best to create spaces where policymakers and young people were equals in expertise.” - Fresh Voices youth advisor

“Fresh Voices is a powerful proposition: youth themselves directly bringing their voice to decision-makers. It's not just that someone has come up with good policy ideas, found some youth and brought them to your door. Instead, it's grassroots organizing and research that gives rise to policy recommendations.” - City Councillor

“Early on we realized we don't have an evidence problem, we have a policy problem. How do we influence public will to provide political license for the policy shifts that need to happen?” - Staff member

### Practices

- Use foundation credibility and networks to open doors to decision-makers
- Host youth-led policy events
- Prepare youth before meetings
- Training for youth: how to talk to politicians
- Solutions journalism: hire nonprofit news outlets to investigate the issue
- Create communications that join youth voice with institutional voice
- Connect young people to public policy forums

## 2 There are not many venues where youth and decision-makers can discuss public policy, but we can create them.

**FRESH VOICES** : Annual Forums included youth-only days as well as sessions when policy makers and adult allies joined in the discussion on policies to improve newcomer youth success.

**Fostering CHANGE** : Youth Policy Solutions Day, held in the B.C. capital following the 2017 election, was led by 60 youth from government care. A day-long priority-setting meeting the previous month prepared them to host a meeting with a large group of MLAs and community stakeholders. The public rally held the same day received over 80 pieces of media coverage.

### 3 Youth with lived experience can engage in all phases of advocacy – and campaigns will be stronger as a result.

**fostering CHANGE** : When the commitment was made to launch the first campaign, a commitment was also made to involve youth from foster care in as many aspects of the work as possible. Youth advisors built their skills in advocacy and public policy in real time, while contributing their insights and knowledge to the strategy. Youth worked alongside staff, consultants and web designers. They had their hand in every call to action, public event, media release and policy proposal. Youth leadership made the campaign real and inspired the public and decision-makers to get on board.

“When we put young people in touch with the communications team and involved them in every stage, including the design, color, content of the website, that shifted the ownership for the campaign. It became clear that we had to continue this practice of deep youth engagement.” - Staff member

### 4 Combining the Foundation’s credibility with young people’s voices makes for powerful public and political outreach.

Part of the Foundation’s added value is its visibility and access to networks of power. There were many opportunities to leverage that power to support the voices and goals of youth by opening doors to influential people and shining light on youth recommendations.

**FRESH VOICES** : In early 2017, the US instituted a travel ban on certain countries. The Foundation CEO responded with a public statement alongside a Fresh Voices member who had arrived in Canada as a refugee from Iran. She says, “That was the best thing that happened for me, making the statement together with the CEO. It was important that a young person from one of those countries be part of taking that stand.”

“Vancouver Foundation was helpful for knowing how to work through the systems and getting the youth to the places they needed to be. Once they were there, youth really made the difference.”- School board trustee

### 5 Hire experts at key points to help build strategy and tactics.

Building public and political will took skills and know-how that Foundation staff and youth didn’t always have. Throughout the initiatives, youth and staff called on consultants to assist them to define key messages, focus campaigns, plan community engagement processes, conduct government relations, and produce research and policy alternatives.

### 6 A modest investment in advocacy can lead to a huge return for society.

**fostering CHANGE** : A fundamental policy ask since the start of the initiative was to increase financial support for youth aging out of foster care so they can get on their feet and pursue training and education. In 2016, and again in 2018, the BC Government made significant improvements to the amount, eligibility and length of time youth could access financial support. The government recently announced a \$30 million investment in the service over the next three years, showing that the Foundation’s advocacy investment was worth it.

Lessons on ...

# Community collaboration and grantmaking

## 1 Foundation-led initiatives rely on strong connections with community groups for knowledge and legitimacy.

**Foundations work in an ecosystem of actors**, but when they spearhead an initiative they can have a disproportionate impact on that ecosystem. The best initiatives will respect the experience of other organizations, collaborate with communities and build upon existing work.

“The Foundation can do all this policy and campaign work, but if we’re not also supporting programs in the community, we’re going to lose the relationships as well as the intelligence that comes with that. The social proof of this work needs to be demonstrated by community organizations, not by the Foundation.” - Staff member

“Our organization has been working with foster children for 30 years. When an actor as big as Vancouver Foundation entered in, it gave new legitimacy and visibility to these issues. Now we are able to attract MPs and city councillors to our events. We are more important to decision-makers than before.” - Community partner and grantee

### Practices

- Encourage partnership activities between youth and other community groups
- Provide grants at different levels: grassroots, services and advocacy
- Include youth engagement in criteria for grants
- Encourage youth-led grants
- Convene grantees and host Grantee Learning Days
- Involve youth in facilitating and training grantees
- Assist grantees to make connections to other organizations and funders

## 2 Convening learning events is an effective way to build connections among grantees and a stronger field.

**Fostering CHANGE** : Grantees were brought together to exchange practices and discuss their challenges supporting youth aging out of foster care. Held two to three times per year, Learning Days honoured the wisdom held by community groups, assisted them to imagine new solutions as a network, and created insights and buy-in for advocacy campaigns.

“Vancouver Foundation worked really hard to be a network medium, bringing grantees together to learn and share. We realized we have the same objectives and can collaborate instead of being siloed and competing for funding.” - Community partner and grantee

### 3 Once community partners are engaged in a campaign, make sure information continues to flow.

**fostering CHANGE** : The Foundation worked hard to get community groups' buy in and engagement in the advocacy campaigns up front. Community partners appreciated this but wanted more communication and transparency throughout the initiative, for example, explaining why a policy position changed.

“You create a network and the community supports the public policy campaign. People put a lot of effort and time into it. When it all gets going, you need a feedback mechanism that shows the progress being made towards the stated goals.” – Community partner

### 4 The Foundation's emphasis on youth engagement encouraged community organizations to improve their practice.

**Lead by example.** Youth engagement was a criterion for organizations seeking grants from the initiatives. Yet many community agencies were not experienced in deeply involving and listening to youth. The consistent emphasis on youth engagement – and the fact that community partners could see it in action whenever they had contact with the initiatives – created a positive ripple effect.

### 5 The youth advisory councils become a resource for the community: a stream of young leaders skilled in engagement.

**The training and experience youth received** during the initiatives in group facilitation, community engagement, research and advocacy made them sought after partners, advisors and facilitators.

**FRESH VOICES** : Many immigrant-serving agencies, community organizations and government bodies came to the Youth Advisory Team seeking partnership. For example, Immigrant Services Society of BC invited Fresh Voices to co-lead a consultation with young Syrian refugees to capture their experiences of their first 100 days in Canada and share their recommendations with elected officials.

“The youth facilitators became legitimate advisors in our field. The initiative gave our network of organizations, even City Hall, access to an untapped network of young people who had become experienced in effective community engagement.” - Community partner

### 6 Providing grantees with flexibility to change activities as projects progressed helped them focus on doing their best work.

“We were listening to the interests and needs of the youth, and that would sometimes be different than what we had planned. The Foundation was flexible with us in terms of changing the project to meet the needs of the youth. That allowed us to do more meaningful work.” - Grantee

“The Foundation worked closely with grantees. They got an intimate look at the barriers and opportunities so agencies were less afraid to give legitimate feedback. The Foundation didn't want the initiatives to fail. They encouraged us to look for what was working and expand it. Most funders think they can't take that risk and we have to pretend the proposal is perfect, that the organization always knows exactly what it's doing.” - Community partner and grantee

Lessons on ...

# Getting the board & donors on board

## 1 Teach everyone - staff, board and youth - about guidelines for non-partisanship and advocacy as a registered charity.

**A common concern about foundations engaging in advocacy is that charity regulations don't allow it.** To reassure the board and reduce its sense of risk, Vancouver Foundation leadership explained the basic rules about what was allowed under the law ("charitable" and "political" activities) and what was not allowed (partisanship). It was also essential for staff - and a useful leadership skill for youth - to learn how to demonstrate non-partisanship in their work.

“Ultimately the thing with advocacy is to be scrupulously non-partisan. Staff were very clearly able to work with both opposition and government, and this helped the board to become comfortable with the campaigns.” - Foundation executive

“Over the years, the board gradually took on a mindset that young people were a key part of our granting field. When the directors heard from youth at board meetings, they were impressed with young people's due diligence. The board developed a healthy respect for youth.” - Foundation executive

“The board saw the Foundation's role as an incubator. Youth and small organizations have great ideas and aspirations. Often they need some structure and process to get it off the ground.” - Board member

## 2 No surprises: Executive's role is to understand what is happening at the program level and ensure the board is informed in advance.

“When youth started having meetings with provincial ministers, the board said, 'Is it risky, is the Foundation's reputation going to be ok?' My job was to make sure I knew as much as possible about what was being planned so that I could keep the board abreast.” - Foundation executive

## 3 To do their best work, donor services staff need to understand the initiative and how it contributes to the foundation's goals.

**Because Fostering Change and Fresh Voices evolved in a fluid way, it was not always clear to staff how to promote these initiatives to donors.** Donor services staff recommend that a foundation identify broad charitable causes that it commits to in the long term. For example, Vancouver Foundation has ten priority causes that are used to frame its work to donors, such as health, youth, and eliminating homelessness. These priority causes help assure donors, especially those creating permanent endowments, that their funds will always be used for the broad purpose they identify, even if the specific program changes.



## Practices

- Educate board, staff and youth on non-partisan advocacy guidelines
- Maintain open, regular communication between executive and program staff
- Combine public opinion, research and youth stories to make the case for the program
- Make a clear link between the youth program and the foundation's goals
- Youth make presentations at board meetings
- Prepare board, donors and youth in advance
- Liaison person between donor relations and program teams
- When appropriate, invite donors and board to youth-led events
- Messaging to donors and board reflects positive narrative of youth
- Program staff join in donor meetings
- Inform all staff about purpose and progress of youth programs

## 4 The more informed the donor services and program teams are about each other's work, the more opportunities will emerge to generate support.

Donors services staff often found themselves “out of the loop,” lacking information to do their job, for example getting notice too late to engage donors in Fresh Voices or Fostering Change events. Challenges also arose when communications and donor services staff used language to describe the initiatives that diverged from the narratives developed by youth and program staff, for example, emphasizing the vulnerability of marginalized youth. Program staff often struggled when asked to report back to donors about the impact of their donation, because the initiatives were not about service delivery. To break down the silos between programs and donor services within the Foundation, a liaison person now proactively works to ensure they exchange information regularly.

“It was important for our team to understand why the Foundation is running a program instead of just making grants. What makes the program unique? How does it relate to the organizational objectives? It was not always easy for us to explain to donors.”  
- Donor services staff member

## 5 Don't be worried about the few donors who don't think advocacy or hosting programs is the role of a foundation. Many others will enthusiastically support addressing root causes.

Donors often think of a community foundation as a grantmaker and a place to create an endowment, not as an advocate or a host for programs. A growing number of Vancouver Foundation's donors are aware, however, that solutions to community challenges lie in improving systems. They are willing to support the Foundation to use its voice and position to address root causes.

Lessons on ...

# Change within the Foundation

## 1 Commit to learning and change across the organization.

**No one knew quite what Vancouver Foundation was getting into when it embarked on these initiatives.** Not youth, staff, executive, board, nor community partners. Making learning an explicit part of the initiative reinforces a humble, exploratory attitude, a “beginner’s mind,” as the Fostering Change team liked to say.

“*In youth engagement there are no mistakes just learning opportunities.*” - Fostering Change youth advisor

**A personal commitment to change by individuals working within the Foundation seemed to create the conditions for more effective initiatives.** As a staff member said: “A fundamental lesson of philanthropy is: the more you give, the more you get. Giving is not just about money. The commitment we each make to listening to marginalized voices, questioning our assumptions, trying things in a new way and truly valuing youth - that is what underpins all this good work.” - Staff member

“*The biggest challenge was within ourselves. Trusting youth is a big jump for most of us adults who like to have control. I had to make that jump myself.*” - Foundation executive



## “ Vancouver Foundation wants to have a positive community impact.

We do that by listening to the community, not by following what funders or governments think the priorities ought to be. In Fresh Voices and Fostering Change, youth decided what issues they wanted to approach and the position they wanted to take. Our job was to give them access to resources, including people and finances, that would help them put forward their ideas in a persuasive manner – and to make sure that whatever support we gave them was used well, in a guided and professional way, so that they had some impact.”  
– Foundation executive

## 2 Just as youth are building leadership capacity, so the organization needs to increase its capacity for inclusion.

The Foundation expressed enthusiasm for both initiatives and backed it up with financial and human resources. But when it came to adjusting internal practices to support the work, the responsiveness of the organization was uneven. Sometimes barriers would be removed easily. Other times questions would arise about why the process took the time it did, why youth were meeting so often, or why the food budget seemed high (as one young person said, "You wouldn't feed your other advisors pizza!"). Program staff reflected that not all departments within the Foundation were ready to support meaningful youth engagement. Organizational choices such as whether or not to allow evening or weekend meetings in the office or how honoraria should be disbursed had an effect on the overall climate of inclusion/exclusion.

“Recognize that the whole organization needs to be on board. There's a lot of internal work that needs to happen before being ready to take on an inclusion program. If adults are not engaged in their own learning process to address fears about making mistakes and sharing power, it is hard to engage young people.” - Staff member

“If we're not getting out of our comfort zones, we're probably not doing youth engagement well.” - Staff member

## 3 Be innovative to find ways to balance the Foundation's need for risk management and the conditions for successful youth engagement.

Expect that barriers within the institution will come to light - and when they do, be willing to try something different to increase inclusion of marginalized youth. It's helpful to ask, "how can we adapt our usual ways of working to create fewer barriers for youth, not more?"

“If youth engagement is something you want to do, commit and do it well. Don't half-commit.” - Fresh Voices youth advisor

**fostering CHANGE** : Changes that seem small to the institution can actually have huge consequences for young people. Twice the Foundation administration changed the way youth advisors received compensation because of concern about accountability, from a small cash honoraria at each meeting, to a small cheque at each meeting, to a modest lump sum amount termed a bursary. In one case, a youth advisor living in social housing became ineligible for his apartment because he had to declare the bursary as income.

“We had an obligation to protect the organization. At the same time we had to acknowledge that we were asking youth to step into our box, not the other way around. So we had to face that there would be some things we needed to adjust internally.”  
- Foundation executive



# The commitment to youth continues

## **As Fostering Change and Fresh Voices take their next steps beyond Vancouver Foundation, the Foundation is building on the lessons learned to inform a new youth priority.**

**Focused on racial equity, Vancouver Foundation's new youth programming will support engagement, participation and capacity building of Indigenous and immigrant and refugee young leaders age 18 to 25 across B.C.**

The emerging youth priority area continues to be guided by the key strategies and tools used in Fostering Change and Fresh Voices, including meaningful youth engagement, grantmaking, convening, learning and evaluation. Three streams of activity are planned:

- Community grants - to create opportunities for Indigenous and immigrant/refugee youth leadership within the charitable/non-profit sectors
- Youth Public Policy Program – to educate and train young leaders to develop and pursue policy solutions to address the issues that affect them
- Civic Engagement – to support young leaders to engage in grassroots social change through activities including community organizing and political advocacy

As Vancouver Foundation embarks on this next phase of youth engagement, the leadership, staff and board look forward to reflecting and sharing learning with others in the sector.

**Learn more:**

[vancouverfoundation.ca](http://vancouverfoundation.ca)

[fosteringchange.ca](http://fosteringchange.ca)

[freshvoices.ca](http://freshvoices.ca)

