

# Systems Alone Do Not Create Opportunity - Relationships Do:

*Youth-Centered Recommendations for Improving  
& Sustaining Supportive Adult Relationships for  
Youth in LA County*



LA County  
**Youth Mentoring Nexus**

An Initiative of  L.A. OPPORTUNITY  
YOUTH COLLABORATIVE



# Community Guidelines

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*Respect & Inclusion*

*Confidentiality & Emotional Safety*

*Active Listening & Communication*

*Joy, Energy, & Shared Space*

*Open-Mindedness & Growth*

*Accountability & Engagement*

*Collaboration & Support*

YOUTH  
MENTORING  
NEXUS

A CONNECTION  
OR SERIES  
OF CONNECTIONS  
LINKING TWO  
OR MORE  
THINGS

MENTORING  
NEXUS

VISIONARIES

# Why We're Here Today

Over the past year, the Youth Mentoring Nexus Visionaries (YMNV) developed a set of recommendations to improve how system-impacted young people build and sustain supportive adult relationships in Los Angeles.

These recommendations are grounded in:

- Lived expertise
- Youth co-design
- Healing-centered practice
- Systems change



# What is the Youth Mentoring Nexus (YMN)?

A countywide initiative working to align cross-system efforts and ensure every young person has access to consistent, caring adult support.

YMN brings together:

- Youth leaders
- Community-based organizations
- Systems Partners: youth-serving government agencies





# Who are the Youth Mentoring Nexus Visionaries?

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The Youth Mentoring Nexus Visionaries are a cohort of young leaders with lived experience navigating systems across Los Angeles County.

They serve as subject matter experts on what makes supportive relationships:

- Effective
- Meaningful
- Trustworthy
- Consistent
- Youth-centered



# How We Got Here: A Year of Youth Co-Design

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**Summer  
2025**

Vision Building: Visionaries identified what a youth-centered mentoring system should look like

Mission Development: Visionaries defined the purpose and goals of the cohort

**Winter  
2025-  
2026**

Vision Building: Visionaries identified what a youth-centered mentoring system should look like

Mission Development: Visionaries defined the purpose and goals of the cohort

**Fall  
2025**

Defining Themes/Pillars: Ideas were grouped into key themes that shaped the recommendations

Brainstorming & Ideation: Youth generated initial ideas and solutions to improve mentorship

Interface Activity: Visionaries reviewed, refined, and finalized the recommendations

**Spring  
2026**

Co-Design Review Systems Change Activity: Engaging stakeholders in systems change discussions

Report Review: Review, analysis, and feedback of the recommendations report

Presentation Review



# Why This Work Matters

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## Youth want to be connection to Someone Who Cares

- According to youth, supportive adults help:
  - Navigate systems
  - Persist through transitions
  - Build stability
  - Stay connected to opportunity
  - Feel seen and supported

## Research Backs up the importance of these connections.

- Studies show, Young Adults with Mentors:
- Have better physical, mental, social, and spiritual wellbeing
- More readily foster resilience, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation

*55% of youth with at least one mentor are more likely to enroll in college.*

*75% of Americans who had a mentor growing up say that relationship was a major contributor to their success.*



# The Current Challenge

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For far too many Opportunity Youth in LA, supportive relationships are often fragmented, disrupted by transitions, and dependent on luck rather than system design.

The Visionaries described the impact of this fragmentation where the must:

- Must continually rebuild trust
- Retell their stories
- Lose important relationships
- Experience inconsistent support
- Be in the right place at the right time to get support


**Systems are not designed to protect relationships over time.**



# What Youth Mean by "SOMEONE WHO CARES" (SWC)

Many Visionaries felt the term and implication of the term "mentor" doesn't represent what they actually want and need.

Instead, they coined the phrase Someone Who Cares – representing a mindset and language shift.



"Someone Who Cares has expanded my understanding of mentorship and has allowed me to look at my experiences differently."

- Iziko  
Youth Mentoring Nexus  
Visionary

## Traditional "Mentor"

- Program-centered
- Hierarchical
- Formal
- Restrictive
- Transactional
- Inauthentic



## Someone Who Cares (SWC)

- Relationship-centered
- Youth-guided, mutual respect
- Flexible, Organic
- Expansive
- Relational
- Authentic, trust-based



## SWC Can Be Summarized by the Five C's

**Care** | Compassion and genuine interest in the young person's well-being

**Consistency** | Reliable, steady presence that builds trust over time

**Collaboration** | Working with youth, empowering them to define their own goals

**Cultural Respect** | Honoring the backgrounds, identities, and experiences of each young person

**Connection** | Linking youth to opportunities, resources, and community networks

# Priority Areas

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Based on their recommendations, the Visionaries identified five interconnected priority areas that reflect the broader conditions youth said are necessary for strong supportive relationships.



## Cultural Responsiveness

Ensuring systems and strategies are responsive to young people's cultural backgrounds and intersectional identities, especially those that have been historically marginalized.



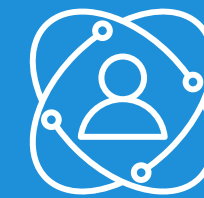
## Holistic Stability

Recognizing that relationships cannot thrive when basic needs go unmet.



## Representation & Follow Through

Committing to shared power and creating opportunities for youth to shape or lead mentorship-oriented initiatives from start to finish.



## Lived Experience & Systems Navigation

Valuing lived expertise and supporting diverse mentors who are familiar with navigating systems and have knowledge of programs specific to system-impacted young people.



## Youth Centered Pathways to Connection

Creating clear, accessible opportunities for young people to find and sustain supportive adult relationships.

# Recommendations for Systems Partners

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Youth-Serving County agencies and departments help **shape how youth build and sustain supportive relationships**. Youth are asking for greater fidelity to existing policies – ensuring relationships are not left to chance.

1. Embed youth co-design as a standard practice internally and externally

2. Expand meaningful youth leadership and decision-making power

3. Strengthen accountability through intentional feedback-to-action loops

4. Prioritize continuity of supportive adult relationships

5. Recognize relationships as a core protective factor

6. Strengthen cross-system coordination and shared responsibility

7. Align implementation with existing policy expectations

8. Design for continuity in a high-turnover environment

# Recommendations for CBOs

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Often, Community-Based Organizations are working **directly with youth to support access to Someone Who Cares**. Youth are asking for environments and practices that prioritize relationship-building as a core function of service delivery.

1. Reframe mentorship around youth-defined trust and support

2. Treat lived experience as expertise, with feedback and accountability

3. Create welcoming and consistent environments for system-impacted young people

4. Invest in culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and healing-centered training

5. Recruit and support representative staff, volunteers, and leaders

6. Make organic relationship-building intentional and supported

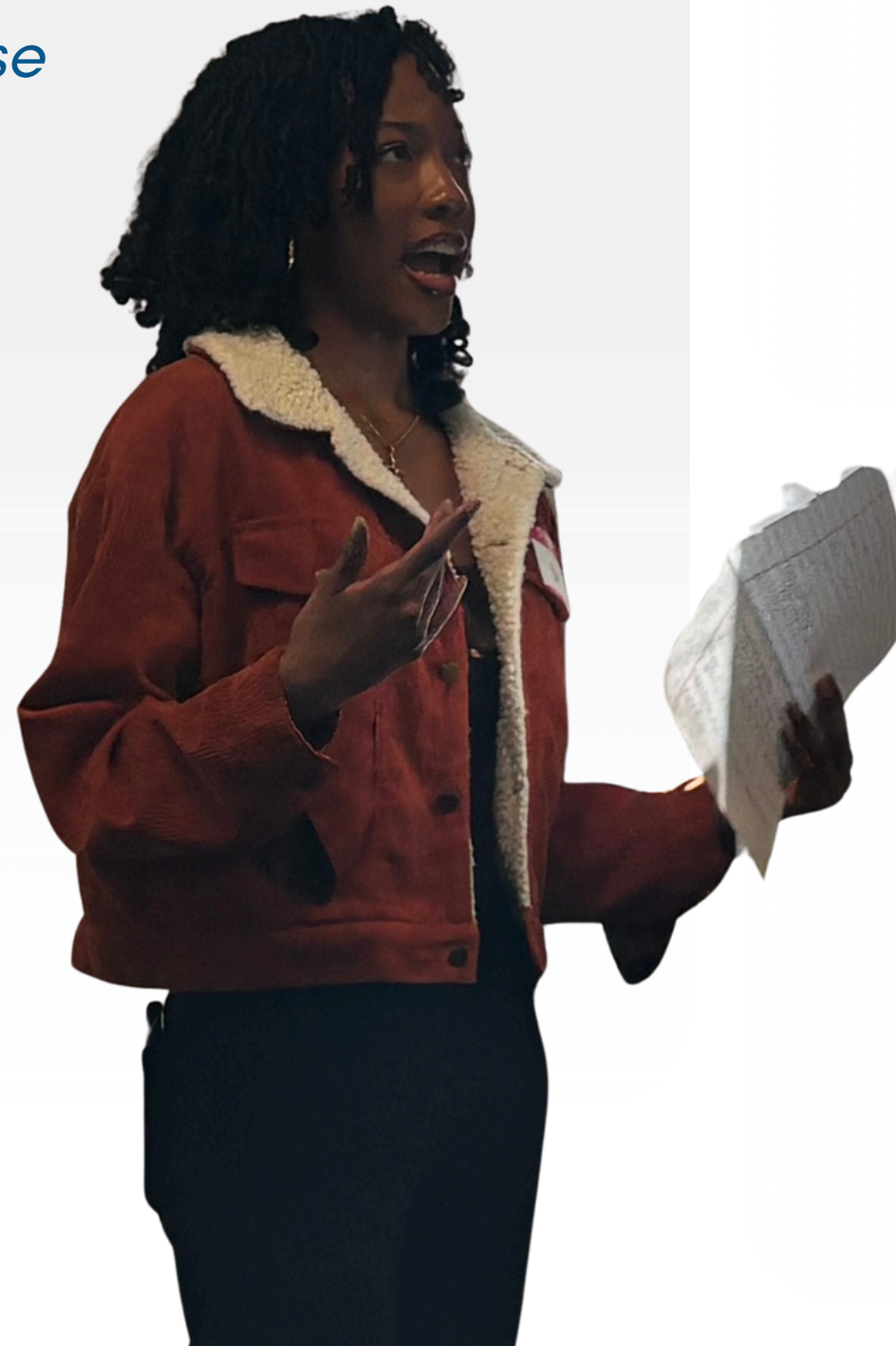
7. Design youth-centered matching and connection pathways

8. Connect mentorship to holistic stability and continuity

# Indicators of Progress

*What will we see if these recommendations are implemented successfully?*

Sustainable change is evident when trusted adult relationships are treated as essential infrastructure across youth-serving systems.



## Short-Term (Within 12 Months)

- Increased use of structured youth feedback mechanisms across programs
- Demonstrated use of youth feedback to adjust training, engagement strategies, and service pathways
- Inclusion of paid youth engagement in program design or redesign
- Increased alignment of program practices with existing policy expectations (e.g., continuity in transition planning)
- Updates to contract requirements and performance expectations that reflect relational outcomes

## Long-Term Indicators (within 18-24+ Months)

- Reduced staff turnover and stronger continuity practices when staff transitions occur
- Youth report access to at least one trusted adult or Someone Who Cares
- Youth report increased trust and perceived support over time
- Youth report greater continuity of relationships across transitions
- Increased youth persistence in education, employment, housing stability, or other self-defined goals

# Final Thoughts

When relationships are protected, young people are more likely to thrive.

Every young person deserves  
**Someone Who Cares.**



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# Thank You!

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## Questions?



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