

# CALIFORNIA YOUTH EMPOWERMENT COMMISSION



2024-2025  
**ANNUAL REPORT**



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## Introductory Letter from the Chair

On behalf of the Youth Empowerment Commission (YEC), I am honored to present this Annual Report for 2024–2025. Serving as Chair of this Commission during its early years has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life, not only as a young leader, but as someone whose lived experiences reflect many of the realities facing youth across California.

When I joined the Youth Empowerment Commission, I carried with me the stories of my community, my peers, and my own journey navigating systems that were not always designed with youth in mind. Like many of the young people we represent, I have experienced moments of being unheard or underestimated. Those experiences shaped how I approached my role as Chair and continue to guide how I lead, which is with humility, persistence, and a deep commitment to ensuring that youth voices are not only welcomed into decision-making spaces, but respected once they arrive.

Throughout my time as Chair, I have witnessed the power of young people when they are given the opportunity to lead. I have seen youth speak courageously about mental health, housing stability, education, and safety in their communities. I have watched young leaders step into rooms where decisions are made and advocate for change that reflects their lived realities. These moments have reaffirmed my belief that lived experience is not a limitation, it is a source of insight, resilience, and leadership.

This report represents more than a collection of data or recommendations. It reflects the voices of youth across California who trusted us with their stories and perspectives. It reflects the dedication of Commissioners who balanced school, work, family responsibilities, and personal challenges while still showing up to serve their communities. Most importantly, it reflects a shared commitment to building systems that recognize young people as partners in shaping the future of our state.

As a youth-led body, the Youth Empowerment Commission carries both a privilege and a responsibility. We are privileged

to represent the diverse experiences of young people across California, and we are responsible for ensuring that their voices lead to meaningful action. One of the greatest lessons I have learned as Chair is that youth engagement must go beyond listening, it must lead to change. Young people do not want to be symbolic participants in government; they want to be active contributors to solutions that impact their lives and communities.

Serving as Chair during this foundational period of the Youth Empowerment Commission has strengthened my belief in the power of youth leadership and civic engagement. It has shown me that when young people are trusted with responsibility, supported by mentors, and given access to decision-making spaces, they rise to meet the moment.

As you read this report, I encourage you to reflect not only on the recommendations presented, but on the stories behind them, the stories of young people who are hopeful, resilient, and ready to lead. Together, we can build a California where youth feel seen, heard, and empowered to shape the systems that impact their lives.

Respectfully,

**Wednesday Pope**  
Chair of the Youth Empowerment Commission

## Executive Director's Annual Overview

This past year marked a defining chapter for the California Youth Empowerment Commission. What began as a new body created through state legislation quickly became something much more powerful- a statewide platform for listening, learning, and building trust with young people and communities across California.

When I stepped into this role, I understood that our first responsibility was not simply to operate a Commission, but to earn the confidence of the young people we were created to serve. That meant showing up in their communities, listening without assumptions, and creating spaces where youth could speak honestly about their realities. Over the course of this year, our Commissioners and staff traveled across California, from urban neighborhoods to rural regions, from agricultural communities to tribal lands, to hear directly from youth about what they need to thrive.

What we heard was both sobering and inspiring. Young people spoke candidly about mental health challenges, housing instability, food insecurity, safety concerns, and the desire for meaningful opportunities to learn, work, and lead. They also shared their resilience, their creativity, and their determination to shape a better future for themselves and their communities. Across every region, one message was clear: youth want to be heard, not occasionally, but consistently, and they want systems that reflect their lived experiences.

In response, our work this year focused on building the foundation necessary for lasting impact. We strengthened our internal operations, expanded our partnerships, and designed meeting and engagement practices that prioritize accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and community connection. These efforts may not always be visible, but they are essential to ensuring that the Commission can operate with integrity, credibility, and sustainability over time. As highlighted throughout this report, we intentionally invested in the systems and relationships that will allow this Commission to grow responsibly and deliver meaningful outcomes for youth across the state.

Another major milestone this year was the development and adoption of our first Strategic Plan. This plan represents more than a document, it reflects the collective voice of youth, Commissioners, partners, and community members who helped shape our priorities and direction. It provides a clear roadmap for advancing youth participation in civic life, strengthening partnerships across sectors, and ensuring that young people are not only consulted, but actively engaged in shaping the policies and programs that affect their lives.

As we look ahead, our focus is shifting from building foundations to driving implementation. The next phase of our work will center on translating youth voice into action: supporting post-enactment implementation of policies, strengthening partnerships with state and local leaders, and continuing to expand opportunities for youth to participate meaningfully in government. We are committed to ensuring that the insights gathered from communities do not remain in reports, but instead inform decisions, investments, and systems change across California.

I remain deeply grateful to the Commissioners who have embraced this responsibility with courage and conviction, to our staff and partners who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes, and to the young people and community members who trusted us with their stories. Their voices are the reason this Commission exists, and their leadership will continue to guide our path forward.

Together, we are building more than a Commission. We are building a movement that recognizes youth as partners in governance and essential leaders in shaping the future of our state.

With gratitude,

**Thomisha Wallace**  
Executive Director  
California Youth Empowerment Commission

# Background on the Youth Empowerment Commission

The California Youth Empowerment Act (Act) was made into law with the passage of Assembly Bill (AB) 46 in 2021. AB 46 was informed by the growing need to engage young people directly with California’s policymakers. The bill was authored by Assemblywoman Luz Rivas and resulted in the creation of the Youth Empowerment Commission.

The YEC consists of 13 voting commissioners between the ages of 14 and 25 who meet specified requirements. The Act requires 11 members appointed by the Governor, one at-large member appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules, and one at-large member appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly. Additional commissioners serve as ex officio, nonvoting members from various geographic regions of the state.

The YEC is an advisory body. Its primary purpose is to provide meaningful opportunities for civic engagement to improve the quality of life for California’s youth, especially disadvantaged youth whose voices often go unheard.

Governor Gavin Newsom appointed YEC’s executive director Thomisha Wallace in February 2024 to direct the team that

supports YEC and its activities. Fourteen of the Commissioners were then appointed in July 2024, 11 of which were voting members and three were alternates. Per the Act, the Senate Pro Tempore appointed one of the YEC Commissioners in January 2023 and the Speaker of the Assembly appointed one of the YEC Commissioners in August 2022.

As of July 1, 2024, YEC staff are housed within the Governor’s Office of Service and Community Engagement, which also includes California Volunteers and the Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications. YEC’s website was launched on September 6, 2024 (<https://youthempowerment.ca.gov/>) and is updated frequently with new information and meeting materials.

This report highlights the activities resulting from eleven full Commission meetings starting with the Commissioners’ meeting in San Diego November 2024 and up through the meeting in Compton November 2025.

Each of the Commissioners reside, work or attend school in one of the regions shown in Table 1, below.

REGION	COUNTIES INCLUDED
Superior California	Butte, Colusa, El Dorado, Glenn, Lassen, Modoc, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sacramento, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Sutter, Tehama, Yolo, Yuba
North Coast	Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Mendocino, Napa, Sonoma, Trinity
San Francisco Bay Area	Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, City and County of San Francisco
Northern San Joaquin Valley	Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tuolumne
Central Coast	Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Ventura
Southern San Joaquin Valley	Fresno, Inyo, Kern, Kings, Tulare
Inland Empire	Riverside, San Bernardino
Los Angeles Region	Los Angeles
Orange County Region	Orange
San Diego/Imperial Region	Imperial; San Diego

# Commission Capabilities

The Commission was created to provide meaningful opportunities for civic engagement to improve the quality of life for California’s disconnected and disadvantaged youth. To fulfill this charge, the Commission is responsible for five core activities:

1. Examine and discuss policy and fiscal issues affecting the interest, needs, and conditions of the youth of California
2. Formally advise and make recommendations to the Legislature, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Governor on specific legislative and fiscal issues affecting youth
3. Consult with any existing local-level youth advisory commissions and community-based, grassroots youth-led organizations for input and potential solutions on issues related to youth
4. Publish a website to report details relevant to YEC, including, but not limited to, YEC agendas, minutes, resolutions, vote counts, initiatives, commissioner information, photos, and video
5. Publish an annual report to the Legislature, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Secretary of CA Health and Human Services, and Governor detailing YEC activities, issues, demographics, budget, and outcomes

## THESE FIVE ACTIVITIES CAN BE CARRIED OUT THROUGH THE FOLLOWING:

### Policy Leadership:

- Draft and approve **resolutions** that formally articulate the commission’s positions on various youth-related legislative and fiscal policy.
- Draft **model legislation** that addresses issues relating to youth that may be adopted by Members of the Legislature.

### Meetings:

- Provide **testimony** during any committee meeting in the Legislature.
- Form **committees and task forces** to discuss specific issues and policy areas and meet as necessary.
- Conduct **public hearings** with community and youth organizations to identify pressing issues and debate priorities.
- Appoint **advisory committees** from within its membership or with outside members whenever necessary.

### Campaigns:

- Conduct **public awareness campaigns** to raise awareness about the commission and to enhance outreach to the youth in this state.

### Seminars:

- Conduct **periodic seminars** for its members regarding leadership, government, and Legislature.

### Funding:

- Establish **grant application criteria and procedures**, subject to the availability of funding pursuant to Section 8275.
- Award **prizes or direct grants** to organizations in accordance with those regulations as the commission may prescribe.



# Commissioners

The California Youth Empowerment Commission is composed of young leaders from across the state who bring diverse experiences, perspectives, and lived expertise to the work of strengthening youth voice in government. Commissioners are selected through a formal appointment process established in the California Youth Empowerment Act (Assembly Bill 46, 2021), which outlines the structure, eligibility requirements, and expectations for service.

Under AB 46, the Commission consists of 13 voting Commissioners between the ages of 14 and 25, appointed by state leadership to represent youth across California. Eleven members are appointed by the Governor, one at-large member is appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules, and one at-large member is appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly. In addition, several state leaders serve as nonvoting, ex officio members of the Commission.

## Requirements for Service as a Commissioner

Service on the California Youth Empowerment Commission is guided by the requirements established in the California Youth Empowerment Act, which defines the eligibility, composition, and responsibilities of Commissioners. These requirements are designed to ensure that the Commission reflects the diversity of California’s youth and that members are prepared to carry out the Commission’s advisory responsibilities to state leaders.

Youth Empowerment Commissioners are appointed to represent the interests, needs, and conditions of young people across California and to participate meaningfully in civic engagement and public decision-making.

To serve as a Youth Empowerment Commissioner, individuals must meet the following statutory requirements and expectations:

### Eligibility and Appointment Requirements

Commissioners must:

- Be between the ages of 14 and 25 years at the time of appointment, consistent with the youth leadership focus established in state law.
- Be residents of the State of California.
- Be appointed by the Governor, the Senate Committee on Rules, or the Speaker of the Assembly, in accordance with the appointment structure established in statute.
- Reflect the geographic, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity of the state, as required by law to ensure broad representation of California’s youth.
- Demonstrate interest or experience in civic engagement, youth leadership, or community service, supporting the Commission’s role in advising state leadership on youth-related issues.

### Representation and Lived Experience

AB 46 (2021) directs that the Commission include youth with lived experience in systems that significantly impact young people. This includes, but is not limited to, youth who have experienced:

- Foster care
- The juvenile justice system
- Homelessness or housing instability
- Rural or underserved communities
- Barriers to education, employment, or health services

This requirement ensures that the Commission’s work is informed by the perspectives of young people most affected by public systems and policies.

# 2024-2025 Commissioners



**Left to right, top to bottom:** Commissioner Wednesday Pope, YEC Chair representing the Superior CA Region) Term: 2024-2026; Commissioner Aidan Lin-Tostado, YEC Vice Chair Senate Rules Committee Appointee. Term: 2024-2027; Commissioner Melany Accosta-Perra, Southern San Joaquin Valley. Term: 2024-2026; Commissioner Xitlaali Castellanos, Speaker of the Assembly Appointee, Monterey County. Term: 2025-2028; Raj Bhutoria, East Bay Region. Term 2024-2026; Jessica Mi, SF Bay Area. Term 2024-2026; Trevor Merrell, North Coast Region. Term 2024-2026; Adelina Ramirez, San Diego/Imperial Region; Avanti Ramraj, Contra Costa County. Term 2025-2026; Giselle Morris, Central Coast Region. Term 2025-2027; Andrea Terrones, Inland Empire Region. Term 2025-2027; Jocelyn Weinstock, LA Region. Term 2025-2027; Sarah Yee, Superior Ca Region. Term 2024-2026; Collin McCarthy, SF Bay Area. Term 2024-2025; Madyson Chung Lee, Orange County Region. Term 2024-2026; Shae Thomas, Northern San Joaquin Region. Term 2024-2025.

Biographies for Commissioners are provided on the YEC website at <https://youthempowerment.ca.gov/commissioner/>.



# Commission Activities 2024-2025



## September 18, 2025 Klamath

**Voices for Change Forum:** Yurok Reservation

- Youth orgs engaged:
- Rios to Rivers-Paddle Tribal Waters

## September 26-27, 2025 Stockton

**Voices for Change Forum :** one.Choice Alternative School

**Commission Meeting:** San Joaquin Delta College

- Youth orgs engaged:**
- San Joaquin County Office of Education
  - one.Choice Alternative School
  - Elective Officials: Assemblymember Rhodesia Ransom



## November 14-15, 2025 Compton

**Voices for Change Forum and Commission Meeting:** The EntreNous Community Empowerment Facility

- Youth orgs engaged:**
- YouthBuild Chater Schools
  - EntreNous Community Empowerment
  - Elective Officials: Assemblymember Mike Gibson



## September 19, 2024 Oakland

**Commissioner Inauguration and Commission Meeting:** Scottish Rite Center

- Youth orgs engaged:**
- Children Now
  - California Youth Coalition
  - California Children Trust



## January 24-25, 2025 Madera

**Community Meet n Greet and Commission Meeting:** Madera County Superintendent of Schools

- Youth orgs engaged:**
- Youth Leadership Institute
  - Madera Coalition for Community Justice
  - United Way of Fresno/Madera Counties
  - Services Immigrant Rights and Education Network (SIREN)
  - San Joaquin River Conservancy



## April 25-26, 2025 Sacramento

**Community Meet n Greet:** Stanford Sierra Youth & Families

**Commission Meeting:** Governor's Office of Service and Community Engagement

- Youth orgs engaged:**
- The Race and Gender Equity (RAGE) Project



## November 22-23, 2024 San Diego

**Community Meet n Greet (Listening Session) and Commission Meeting:** City Heights Center

- Youth orgs engaged:**
- Live Well San Diego
  - Our Time to Act
  - YMCA San Diego
  - Regional Task Force on Homelessness
  - Elective Officials: Assemblymember Chris Ward



## March 19 & 22, 2025 Imperial Valley

**Community Meet n Greet and Commission Meeting:** Imperial Valley College

- Youth orgs engaged:**
- Comite Civico del Valle
  - Imperial Valley Equity and Justice Coalition
  - UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Students
  - Elective Officials: Mayor Michael Luellen



## July 25-26, 2025 Chico

**Voices for Change Forum (Listening Session):** Boys and Girls Club of The North Valley

**Commission Meeting:** Butte County Office of Education

- Youth orgs engaged:**
- Boys & Girls Club
  - Elective Officials:
  - Council Member Bryce Goldstein
  - Supervisor Tammy Ritter



## October 24, 2025 Riverside

**Voices for Change Forum:** The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture

- Youth orgs engaged:**
- Inland Empire Children's Cabinet
  - Inland Empire Community Collaborative
  - Reaching At Promise Students Association
  - Healthy Valley Foundation



# Commissioners' Inauguration

On September 19, 2024, parents, family, YEC team members, and policy advocates gathered in Oakland, CA for the Inauguration of the first cohort of Youth Empowerment Commissioners. Remarks were provided by the Executive Director, Thomisha Wallace, Alex Briscoe, former Principal at the California Children's Trust, and Lishaun Francis, Senior Director at Children Now. Director Wallace commended the Commissioners for taking on the charge of elevating the needs of underserved youth across the state at an unprecedented time. Former Assemblymember Luz Rivas was also acknowledged for championing AB 46, which enacted the Commission.

Alex Briscoe expressed how it is a "unique time to be young in America" and how we need the commission voice and perspective more than ever considering the mental and behavioral health crisis that our youth are experiencing. Alex urgently expressed to the Commission that "we need you like never before... your intelligence, your wisdom, and your power are essential to changing the systems that serve you". After highlighting impactful policy change in Alameda County that was centered on youth voice and experience, Alex concluded with ensuring that "young people will save themselves and the rest of us if we give them a chance" and platform to do so. Similarly, Lishaun Francis reassured the commissioners that "you all have the deep expertise just from living that you can share with us" to make impactful policy change for youth in California. While encouraging the commissioners to be

bold in their charge, Lishaun urged the commission to "read everything" and "ask yourselves where can we add value" to legislation and budget lines that impacts young people. In her remarks, Lishaun stated "my charge to you is to be interrupters" and to use their unique position to partner with decision makers to challenge the status quo of how youth are served in our state.

The inauguration ended with a swearing in ceremony and the signing of oaths. Following the event, the Commission met for its first meeting, in which Josh Fryday, Chief Service Officer for the Governor's Office of Service and Community Engagement thanked the commission for their service and shared how the state is "counting on [the commission] to be a voice of their generation" and to help the state "think about how do we continue to engage young people across the state" as we solve some of our biggest problems such as poverty, homelessness, and climate change.

Also included on the agenda for this meeting was the introduction of the Commission's training and research partners, the Possibility Lab from UC Berkley, remarks from Jevon Wilkes, Executive Director of California Coalition for Youth on "Elevating Youth Voice in Policy and Legislation", and the commission selecting its first Chair and Vice Chair. Wednesday Pope was selected to serve as Commission Chair, and Aidan Lin-Tostado was selected for Vice Chair.



**Figure 1** Commissioners' taking their oath at Inauguration in Oakland Ca. September 2024



**Figure 2** Alex Briscoe, Former Principal at the California Children's Trust addressing the Commission at Inauguration



**Figure 3** Lishaun Francis, Senior Director at Children Now encouraging Commissioners at the Inauguration

# Building the Operational Foundation for Lasting Impact

The Commission's inaugural year focused on establishing foundational operations, statewide engagement strategies, and long-term planning designed around the initial expectation of funding support through 2030. Subsequent state budget adjustments currently provide funding through June 2027.

Despite this shortened funding horizon, the Commission has prioritized building meaningful youth engagement practices, strategic partnerships, and statewide infrastructure intended to create lasting impact beyond the current funding period. Continued investment in the Commission will be critical to sustaining and expanding opportunities for youth civic participation, leadership development, and partnership with state government.

Since our launch, the Commission has been laying the infrastructure necessary to achieve long-term success. Over the past year, we have grown our team from two to four staff, expanded our community partnerships, and established meeting and community gathering planning processes that allow us to engage communities across the state.

Focusing on these areas is more than an administrative procedure; it is a deliberate strategy to model a community-centered approach in our effort to reach youth across the state. From creating forums for meaningful dialogue to planning our Commission meetings, our team has developed processes for traveling to different regions of California, identifying youth-inclusive venues, building our technical capabilities to expand meeting access through virtual participation options, preparing community-informed programming and meeting agendas, and more.

We understand the importance of doing this work with intention, and by taking the time to build our foundations thoughtfully, we position ourselves not only to achieve our goals but also contribute to the capacity of the State in seeking to reimagine public engagement. This year, we celebrate these essential, often unseen efforts that make our work possible.

## Commission Meeting Design

To ensure that Commission meetings are accessible to youth across California, the YEC intentionally partnered with its commissioners, in which each of whom brings regional insight and community connection, to inform where and how meetings are held. This place-based approach is further strengthened by using data to identify underserved and historically disadvantaged communities, including regions with higher rates of economic hardship, limited access to state resources, and underrepresentation in civic processes. By

combining Commissioner expertise with these data-informed insights, the Commission can prioritize meeting locations that expand access, elevate diverse youth voices, and reduce geographic and systemic barriers to participation.

In practice, this commitment to equitable access is reflected in the design and implementation of every Commission meeting. The YEC ensures that all meetings include a virtual participation option, allowing youth and community members from across the state to engage regardless of location or transportation limitations. In-person meetings are hosted in youth-accessible venues and are supported by both in-person and online language interpretation services to meet the needs of California's diverse communities. To further remove barriers to participation, sponsors and community partners provide breakfast and lunch refreshments for Commissioners and community attendees, recognizing that creating a welcoming and inclusive environment is essential to meaningful engagement. Together, these strategies reflect the YEC's commitment to modeling inclusive, community-centered public engagement practices at the state level.

## Voices for Change Community Listening Forums



Before each meeting, the YEC Team helped organize community-based listening forums to hear concerns directly from youth throughout the state. These *Voices for Change* forums, formerly called Community Meet N Greets, intentionally took place in the local communities where the formal Commission meetings were held, rather than solely in Sacramento. This lowered the barriers to participation and ensured broader geographic and cultural representation of youth voice elevated within the Commission's work.



The forums were designed to be youth-led, interactive, and accessible, creating safe spaces for dialogue between state leaders, young people, and community organizations. By engaging directly with Californians, the Commission captured community insights into issues such as education, mental health, housing, and civic participation, which influenced the development of the Strategic Plan, community partnership developments, and the Commission’s legislative and policy engagement.

Planning for these forums begin well in advance of the actual event itself. Months before the forum, our staff initiate the planning process by identifying a community partner in the region. In doing so, the Commission aims to find a local youth organization whose work is crucial in supporting the well-being of young people within their community and aligned to the values of the Commission. Beginning with this partnership is a vital step, one that we view as foundational to a successful forum.

We are grateful to our community partners for their collaboration, care, and commitment in working with us. Our ability to connect with young people across California would not be possible without the expertise that our community partners lend us throughout the planning process, from designing a structure that reflects the needs and context of their local youth to serving as a trusted community organization who can cultivate the successful turnout that we have experienced at these forums.

The initial Meet N Greet took place in San Diego in November of 2024. Commissioners Aidan and Adelina, who represents the San Diego region, facilitated a discussion with a local youth leader on youth power and collaboration, housing and community inequalities, and affordability. Community members that were present were also engaged in this conversation. Highlights from that conversation are captured below, along with themes and quotes from the panel “San Diego’s Diverse Approaches to Youth Housing Insecurity & Justice” that Commissioner Aidan facilitated the following day at the YEC Meeting.



Next, the Commission traveled to Madera in January 2025 for the second Meet N Greet. Commissioner Shea, representing Madera County, facilitated a panel with youth leaders and youth serving organizations on effective youth engagement and empowerment. The Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications facilitated a “Collaborative Solutions Workshop”, and engaged participants in conversations on mental health, housing, and educational opportunities and barriers within their community.

The conversation with the Madera community was informative and impactful. However, community members shared that Latinos were cautious about attending events, considering the strong Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) presence in Madera at the time. With Madera’s Latino population being approximately 81.1%, this had a significant impact on the attendance, causing this forum to have the lowest turnout to date.

We continued to learn about concerns regarding ICE presence in California, as the Commission traveled further south to Imperial alongside the California Racial Equity Commission for the third community Meet N Greet. This forum was structured as a presentation of data from the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and community listening session. Highlights of the findings and themes that community members elevated are referenced below.



We partnered with the Race And Gender Equity (RAGE) Project youth leaders for the fifth Meet N Greet. This was a pivotal forum for the YEC team, as we incorporated feedback from youth and commissioners that focused on creating a safe and inviting space for youth by incorporating music, art performances, and offering small group discussion opportunities. The RAGE project also introduced the Commission the “Gallery Walk” concept of youth sharing their experiences and suggestions with the YEC.

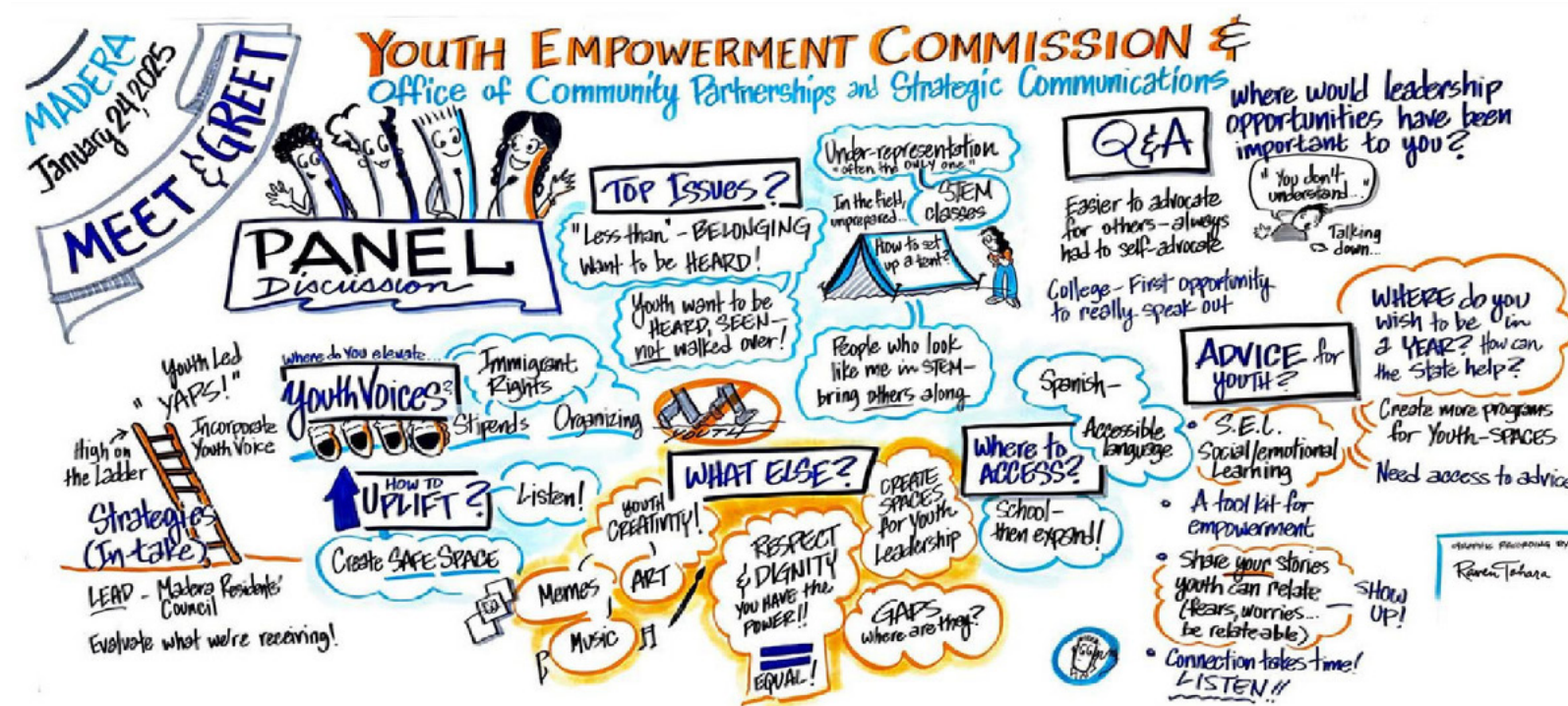
The Gallery Walk is an interactive activity where youth were asked to walk around the room and respond to questions on poster boards using sticky notes. The eight questions that the YEC team ask within this process focus on the priority policy areas of the commission this year, which are Mental Health, Housing, and Education. The questions were intentionally designed to read at a third-grade level to ensure accessibility for all youth.

The success and evaluation of this event encouraged the YEC team to change the name of the listening forums to reflect the intention of the convening... Youth “Voices for Change” within our state government.

The success and evaluation of this event encouraged the YEC team to change the name of the listening forums to reflect the intention of the convening... Youth “Voices for Change” within our state government.

# Voices for Change Forum “Gallery Walk” Questions

1. What helps you feel calm, happy, or safe? What makes it harder?
2. What makes it easy or hard for families in your town to find a place to live?
3. If you could change one thing about your school to make it better for students, what would it be?
4. If teachers or principals could really listen, what would you want them to know?
5. What are some tough things kids your age deal with?
6. Has your town, school, or neighborhood done something that made you feel supported? What else could they do?
7. When do you feel the most proud, strong, or in charge of yourself?
8. If leaders in California asked you how to make life better for kids and teens, what would you tell them?



Above: Graphic Illustration from Madera Meet N Greet January 2025

# What We Heard

As the Youth Empowerment Commission traveled across California, from the North State communities of Chico and Klamath to the agricultural region of the Imperial Valley, and into the urban neighborhoods of Stockton and Compton, we listened to young people share their hopes, challenges, and visions for their futures. In each community, youth spoke candidly about what they need to thrive: stronger mental health support, safer neighborhoods, reliable access to housing and food, meaningful pathways to careers, and the simple but powerful desire to be genuinely heard by the systems designed to serve them. While each region carries its own unique story, a common thread emerged across conversations: mental health remains the most urgent and consistent concern. Youth described how experiences with violence, financial instability, discrimination, and trauma are deeply interconnected with their well-being, underscoring the need for sustained, accessible, and youth-centered investments that meet them where they are and support them on their path forward.

## Themes from Listening Forums

### SAN DIEGO

#### 1. Housing as a Human-Centered Issue

Housing insecurity must be addressed through individualized, human-centered approaches that reflect the diverse realities of youth.

#### 2. Holistic and Integrated Support Systems

Sustainable housing stability requires coordinated, wrap-around services that support the full spectrum of youth needs.

#### 3. Youth Voice and Leadership in Decision-Making

Youth with lived experience must be centered as leaders and decision-makers in shaping housing solutions.

#### 4. Systems Inequity and Structural Barriers

Housing insecurity is rooted in systemic inequities rather than individual failure and requires structural solutions.

#### 5. Funding, Power, and Accountability

Resources and funding must align with and directly support youth-led work while respecting and compensating their contributions.

#### 6. Avoiding Tokenization and Harm

Youth engagement must move beyond performative inclusion to ethical, respectful practices that protect dignity and agency.

#### Overall Key Themes:

Housing insecurity among youth is a systemic, equity-driven issue that requires holistic, human-centered solutions grounded in youth leadership, lived experience, and aligned funding to ensure stability, dignity, and long-term well-being.

### SAN DIEGO QUOTES:

*“When we talk about youth voice... The young people are the table.”*

*“Youth are already powerful. They are already doing the work.”*

### MADERA

#### 1. Access to Resources and Opportunities

Youth identified limited access to programs, services, and opportunities as a barrier to reaching their full potential. There is a strong need for increased awareness and availability of resources that support youth success.

#### 2. Education and Career Pathways

Youth emphasized the need for clearer, more supported pathways to education and careers, including mentorship and skill-building opportunities. Earlier exposure and guidance are critical to helping youth navigate and achieve their goals.

#### 3. Youth Voice and Representation

Youth expressed a desire to be meaningfully included in decisions that impact their lives and communities. They want their perspectives to be heard, valued, and reflected in community solutions.

#### 4. Community Environment and Belonging

Youth highlighted the importance of safe, supportive environments where they feel connected and valued. Expanding youth-centered spaces and opportunities can strengthen community pride and engagement.

#### 5. Mental Health and Well-Being

Youth identified mental health as a key priority and emphasized the need for accessible, culturally responsive support. Reducing stigma and increasing relevant services are essential to improving youth well-being.

#### 6. Community Investment and Equity

Participants called for greater investment in underserved communities to address inequities and disparities. Increased funding, infrastructure, and programming are needed to create more equitable outcomes for youth.

#### Overall Key Themes:

Youth and community members in Madera emphasized the need for stronger access to opportunity, culturally responsive resources, and community-driven solutions, highlighting that empowerment comes from investing in youth voice, local leadership, and equitable systems of support.

### SACRAMENTO QUOTES:

*“I can turn a mess into a masterpiece... Fly, but don’t give up. Fly, so you don’t feel stuck.”*

*“Build your own network. Build your own family.”*

*“[Teachers] don’t know how to handle kids. They talk back.”*

*“[Adults] don’t listen to us ever.”*

*“They looked straight in my face and said I couldn’t go to a majority white school.”*

*“We make these spaces to make a change.”*

*“They wanna see me down but I’m still up... How far can I take this.”*

### SACRAMENTO

#### 1. Feeling Unheard & Adult Disconnect:

Youth shared that they often feel dismissed, misunderstood, or treated as problems rather than people, especially by teachers, counselors, and authority figures.

#### 2. Identity, Belonging & Human Dignity:

Young people **described** experiences of racial bias, stereotyping, and compliance-based school culture, emphasizing the need to be seen as full human beings with dreams and potential.

#### 3. Community Conditions & Environmental Reality:

Youth described their neighborhoods as neglected and stigmatized, yet also as home. They acknowledged structural challenges while recognizing the importance of deeper engagement with community organizations and opportunities for empowerment.

#### 4. Empowerment Through Space & Extracurricular Connection:

Safe, intentional spaces—like the Meet n Greet—along with sports, friendships, and extracurricular activities, help youth feel powerful, connected, and capable of change.

#### 5. Self-Determination & Resilience:

Despite barriers, youth expressed determination to rise above adversity, build their own networks, and define success on their own terms.

#### Overall Key Themes:

Sacramento youth are navigating feelings of invisibility, bias, and systemic neglect while simultaneously demonstrating resilience, leadership, and a deep desire for spaces that affirm their humanity, amplify their voice, and recognize their power to create change.

### CHICO

#### 1. Biggest struggles for youth:

Youth feel unheard and not taken seriously, while struggling with mental health, lack of support, discrimination, and pressure to prove their worth.

#### 2. What helps or harms mental health:

Mental health improves with trusted support, understanding, and connection, and declines with stress, pressure, bullying, and lack of adult support.

#### 3. State actions to make things better:

Youth want increased mental health access, stronger protections and rights, inclusive care, and restored or expanded funding for schools and youth programs.

#### 4. Community support:

Community support empowers youth through safe spaces, resources, mentorship, and opportunities to grow and have their voices heard, with a need for expanded access and funding.

#### 5. When youth feel most empowered:

Youth feel most empowered when they are heard, supported, authentically themselves, and able to overcome challenges or create change.

#### Overall Key Themes:

Youth are seeking to be heard, validated, and supported through stronger mental health resources, inclusive protections, community investment, and meaningful opportunities to exercise their voice and agency.

### CHICO QUOTES:

*“Being only heard as youths with a preconceived notion that their voice bears no weight, instead of holding the weight of their elders’ decisions.”*

*“Mental health/ finding support. Loneliness. Lack of care and then we become ‘problems’ to them.”*

*“The biggest struggle I deal with as a black student is racial discrimination and when stuff happens, I feel unheard.”*

## STOCKTON

### 1. Safety & Stability:

Youth prioritize physical safety—safer streets, better lighting, safe parks, emergency phone access and express concerns about violence, police encounters, gangs, and unsafe environments.

### 2. Basic Needs & Food Security:

Food access and school meal quality are recurring concerns, with youth emphasizing hunger, inadequate school food, and the need for consistent nourishment.

### 3. Economic Opportunity & Transportation:

Teen's face barriers to jobs, transportation, permits, and stable housing, and are asking for hiring opportunities, mentorship, and pathways to financial independence.

### 4. Mental Health, Isolation & Coping:

Youth cope through music, gaming, solitude, and trusted relationships, while struggling with depression, anxiety, addiction, stress, and challenging home environments.

### 5. Voice, Respect & School Climate:

Students want to be listened to by teachers and leaders, feel policies like phone bans ignore real safety concerns, and are asking for practical support rather than control.

#### Overall Key Themes of the Listening Session:

Stockton youth are navigating safety concerns, economic hardship, food insecurity, and mental health challenges while calling for safer environments, real job opportunities, supportive adults, and policies that reflect their lived realities.

#### STOCKTON QUOTES:

*"Kids are getting killed at this age."*

*"We need you more than anyone."*

#### IMPERIAL VALLEY QUOTES:

*"People [are] having to use the bathroom in public (on the ground)."*

*Need for greater support for "invisible and visible disabilities," especially for youth aging out of programs.*

*"Outcomes in the region described as "worse than ever."*

*"We need our young people...to come back to their community."*

## IMPERIAL VALLEY

### 1. Basic Needs and Access

Community members emphasized significant barriers to meeting basic needs, including access to housing, sanitation, transportation, and disability services. Residents face persistent gaps in essential services and infrastructure that directly impact dignity, health, and daily quality of life.

### 2. Disparities in Economic, Legal, and Health Outcomes

Participants shared lived experiences of inequities across systems, including labor conditions, legal access, and health outcomes. Systemic inequities in economic opportunity, legal access, and environmental conditions are producing disproportionate harm for vulnerable populations.

### 3. Border Region Challenges and Structural Inequities

Community members highlighted unique challenges tied to living in a border region, including environmental, social, and service-related inequities. Border-region dynamics compound systemic inequities, creating distinct challenges that require tailored, place-based policy responses.

### 4. Youth Opportunity and Upward Mobility

Research and community input emphasized the need for stronger pathways for youth in education, employment, and career readiness. Youth in Imperial Valley need expanded, inclusive pathways to education, career opportunities, and upward mobility.

### 5. Civic Engagement and Community Participation

Participants expressed a strong desire for increased civic engagement and community involvement, particularly among youth. Strengthening civic engagement, especially among youth, is critical to building community power and improving local outcomes.

### 6. Community Voice, Trust, and Representation

The event reinforced the importance of listening to community voices and building trust between residents and institutions. Authentic engagement that centers lived experience is essential for building trust and informing equitable policy solutions.

### 7. Equity as a Public Priority

Speakers and participants reinforced that equity must be treated as a shared public responsibility rather than a niche issue. Advancing racial and community equity must be recognized and acted upon as a collective public priority.

#### Overall Key Theme of the Listening Session:

Community members in Imperial Valley highlighted that systemic inequities, particularly in access to basic needs, economic opportunity, health, and civic participation, are deeply shaped by regional and border-specific conditions, requiring place-based, equity-driven solutions that center lived experience and community voice.

## INLAND EMPIRE

### 1. Safety, Stability & Belonging:

Youth feel safest with supportive family, trusted friends, cultural connection, programs, and stable environments, while stress, unsafe spaces, political climate, and instability make it harder to feel secure.

### 2. Mental Health, Burnout & Identity:

Students are navigating anxiety, depression, burnout, self-doubt, and fear of the future, often compounded by family pressure, financial stress, substance abuse, and the struggle to understand their identity and purpose.

### 3. Basic Needs & Economic Barriers:

Food insecurity, housing instability, transportation gaps, college affordability, and financial inequality significantly impact youth well-being and access to opportunity.

### 4. Youth Voice, Respect & Educational Reform:

Young people want collaborative school environments that treat them as humans, value their input, diversify curriculum, reduce stigma, and prioritize culturally relevant, equitable, and inclusive education.

### 5. Career Pathways & Skill-Building Opportunities:

Youth are seeking real-world preparation through career readiness programs, public speaking, mentorship, leadership development, and clearer pathways beyond high school.

#### Overall Key Theme of the Listening Session:

Youth are calling for stability, dignity, and meaningful opportunity, especially with seeking mental health support, economic security, culturally relevant education, and authentic partnership with adults who recognize their humanity, voice, and future potential.

#### INLAND EMPIRE QUOTES:

*"Validation > Education."*

*"We are real human beings with dreams, passions and ideas that transcend school."*

*"Emotional health and having a purpose! So much of our lives are controlled by parents, school and activities. We forget ourselves in all of that."*

## COMPTON

### 1. Safety, Environment & Staying Off the Streets:

Youth are navigating gang violence, drug exposure, unsafe neighborhoods, housing instability, and homelessness, while seeking safe spaces, structured programs, and supportive environments to stay focused and out of harm's way.

### 2. Mental Health, Trauma & Stigma:

Young people face depression, anxiety, substance abuse, family instability, generational trauma, and embarrassment around seeking help, with mental health often minimized or mishandled by systems meant to support them.

### 3. Economic Stability, Housing & Basic Needs:

Financial insecurity, job access, unstable housing, lack of rent caps, food quality, and limited transportation create daily barriers to education, stability, and long-term opportunity.

### 4. Education, Resources & Institutional Support:

Students call for smaller class sizes, more funding, bilingual teachers, better food, updated equipment, flexible policies, and culturally responsive schools that invest in infrastructure and real student success.

### 5. Respect, Voice & Human Dignity:

Youth want patience, trust, flexibility, and acknowledgment of their lived experiences—asking adults and leaders to listen, reduce stigma, and treat them as individuals navigating complex home and community realities.

#### Overall Key Theme of the Listening Session:

Compton youth are striving for stability, opportunity, and dignity while confronting violence, economic hardship, housing insecurity, and mental health challenges, and are calling for stronger programs, resources, and authentic adult support to help them build safer and more hopeful futures.

#### COMPTON QUOTES:

*"If your mental health is bad, you get viewed as a failure and still isn't taken seriously."*

*"There are a lot of problems that don't get brought to light because of the fear of backlash."*

*"Some kids home life really takes a toll on them so sometimes school isn't the main priority."*



## Paddle Tribal Waters: Engaging with Indigenous Youth in Klamath

The Youth Empowerment Commission’s listening session in Klamath, California, was inspired by the extraordinary leadership demonstrated by Tribal youth who participated in the historic first-ever full descent of the Klamath River. Following the removal of four dams along the river, members of the Tribal Paddle Waters group kayaked more than 300 miles to honor the river, their ancestors, and the restoration of natural waterways that are central to tribal culture and identity. Recognizing the significance of this moment for Indigenous communities and youth leadership, the Commission intentionally sought to connect with the young people who took part in this journey. Their expedition represented not only a physical accomplishment, but also a powerful expression of cultural resilience, environmental stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility, which are values that closely align with the Commission’s mission to elevate youth voice and lived experience across California.

On September 18, 2025, the Commission convened youth, families, tribal members, and community leaders in Klamath to engage in a meaningful dialogue about life as Indigenous youth living in sovereign tribal territory. The conversation was facilitated by Commissioner and Vice Chair Aidan Lin-Tostado, who guided participants in reflecting on their experiences during the river descent and their broader perspectives on community, culture, and leadership. Youth shared how participation in the Paddle Tribal Waters program strengthened their connection to traditions, land, and water, helped them build confidence and mentorship skills, and inspired future aspirations in environmental protection and community service. They also spoke candidly about challenges facing their communities, including water quality concerns, access to cultural education, and the importance of preserving tribal traditions for future generations. The session created a space for youth to share their lived experiences directly with the YEC team and reinforced the Commission’s commitment to engaging communities in ways that honor cultural identity and community sovereignty.

This listening session highlighted the deep relationship between youth well-being, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship within tribal communities. Participants emphasized that restoring and protecting natural resources, especially salmon and clean waterways, is essential not only for environmental sustainability but also for cultural continuity and community health. Youth and community members also underscored the need for sustained partnership, visibility, and trust-building between state government and tribal communities, noting that meaningful engagement requires ongoing presence and follow-through. These insights provide critical guidance for the Commission as it continues to strengthen culturally responsive engagement strategies and ensure that tribal youth perspectives are reflected in statewide conversations about environmental justice, youth leadership, and community well-being.



### KEY THEMES AND QUOTES FROM THIS SESSION ARE CAPTURED BELOW:

#### Youth Leadership & Empowerment:

Youth see themselves as current leaders and are building confidence, mentorship skills, and advocacy goals through programs like Tribal Waters.

#### Tribal Identity, Culture & Education:

Youth emphasize the importance of cultural connection, storytelling, land and water stewardship, and call for accurate Indigenous history and stronger tribal representation in schools and policy.

#### Environmental Justice & Water Rights:

Community members raised urgent concerns about water contamination, dam impacts, resource diversion, and energy projects that threaten tribal lands, food security, and sovereignty.

#### Trust, Representation & Government Accountability:

Youth expressed deep frustration and mistrust toward state and federal systems, highlighting the need for meaningful consultation, long-term commitment, and real decision-making power.

#### Youth Mental Health & Community Well-Being:

Mental health challenges, such as including suicide and substance use, are closely tied to loss of cultural practices, environmental degradation, and limited access to supportive resources.

#### Overall Key Themes of the Listening Session:

The Klamath Listening Session centers on the interconnected fight for tribal sovereignty, environmental justice, cultural preservation, and youth leadership, underscoring the need for authentic state partnership, accountability, and sustained investment in Indigenous youth and communities.

### KLAMATH QUOTES:

*“We’ve been burned by the government so many times that it’s hard for us to trust you, especially when this is only an advisory board.”*

*“Youth are the leaders now; they will cause the change now.”*

*“Water diversion—50% goes to large agriculture—it undermines tribal water rights and food security.”*



# Our Strategic Planning Process

The Commission’s strategic planning process was designed to create a thoughtful, inclusive roadmap for advancing youth well-being across California. The process unfolded in three key phases, each focused on gathering insights, building understanding, and defining priorities that reflect the needs and perspectives of youth, Commissioners, staff, and community members. These phases are described on the next page.

The Commission intentionally embedded the strategic planning process into a series of public meetings and community events, including the Voices for Change Forum, held across California to engage a broad range of stakeholders. By hosting these sessions in multiple regions, youth, families, local organizations, and other community members had opportunities to share their perspectives and contribute directly to the planning process. The map alongside highlights the locations of both public meetings and Voices for Change Forum events, illustrating the statewide reach and inclusive approach that informed the Strategic Plan’s goals and priorities.

PHASE	DESCRIPTION	KEY ACTIVITIES
<b>Phase 1</b> <b>Current State Assessment</b> <i>Our Story of Today</i>	Explored current needs, outcomes, and supports for California youth to develop Commission understanding of key context that informs future priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discovery Interviews</li> <li>• Benchmarking Research</li> <li>• Community Survey</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 2</b> <b>Visioning</b> <i>The Story of Tomorrow</i>	Developed a vision of what is possible through the work of the Commission and outline its future direction.	<b>7 Workshops:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Planning Focus Question</li> <li>• The WAVE Current Trends Analysis</li> <li>• Seeing Systems</li> <li>• Practical Vision</li> <li>• Underlying Contradictions</li> <li>• Strategic Directions</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 3</b> <b>Strategic Plan Development</b> <i>The Story of Our Journey to Tomorrow</i>	Charts a path to actualize the vision by gathering community feedback to refine, add detail to, and ultimately finalize the Strategic Plan.	

## Key Considerations

**ADDRESS THE GAPS** *MINIMIZE REDUNDANCIES*

Many organizations are already providing youth programs and services. The Commission strives to avoid redundancies and create its greatest impact by focusing on the work that it is uniquely positioned to do.

**BUILD TOWARDS LONGEVITY** *REJECT PERFORMATIVITY*

The Commission wants to not only achieve its greatest impact but also sustain it. To do so, Commissioners expressed the need to partner with youth and communities in meaningful ways, rather than tokenizing young people or serving as a performative body.

**CENTER MARGINALIZED YOUTH** *CHALLENGE INEQUITY*

Marginalized youth are most impacted when systems fail to support young people, yet their voices are often missing in the spaces shaping those systems, including within this Commission. Centering their needs and experiences is vital for addressing critical gaps and strengthening opportunities for all youth.

**BE RESPONSIVE** *AVOID INACTION*

Responding to the needs of young people while staying nimble throughout the ebbs and flows of limited staffing, fiscal shifts, and evolving policies and priorities is crucial. The Commission recognizes the necessity of taking action amid these realities and finds strategic opportunities to do so.

# Our Story of Today: Current State Assessment

Between January and March 2025, the Commission conducted a current state assessment to understand the needs, outcomes, and supports shaping the lives of California’s youth at that time. This involved the YEC Team gathering insights from Commissioners, partners, and community members to better understand where the Commission would be most effective and where there were opportunities for growth. The findings from assessment provided a clear foundation to start setting priorities and guiding the strategic planning phase.



## Assessment Framework

The assessment framework provided a structured way to examine key areas that would influence the Commission’s effectiveness, impact, and connection to California’s youth. The dimensions that follow guided how data and insights were analyzed throughout during this early assessments phase.

### OUR PROCESS

To develop a clear picture of the Commission’s current state in early 2025, the YEC team gathered input from a range of stakeholders using a variety of engagement and research methods. Each activity was designed to capture diverse perspectives on the Commission’s current strengths, its challenges, and future opportunities. Together, these activities created a comprehensive view of where the Commission stood at its outset and where it could find opportunities for growth.

Engagement and research methods during this phase included:

#### Discovery Interviews

The YEC Team conducted 24 interviews with Commissioners, Governor’s office staff, other collaborators within the Governor’s Office of Service and Community Engagement (GO-Serve), and community service providers, totaling 12 hours of interview data.

#### Benchmarking Research

The YEC Team reviewed the strategies of eleven county youth commissions within California to identify practices and opportunities they used to most effectively support local entities.

#### Commission Community Survey

Gathered input from 50 respondents spanning youth, parents and caregivers, youth-serving organizations, government staff, and policy advocates who are engaged in youth-related concerns.

## Assessment Findings

The findings from Phase 1 of the assessment highlighted the Commission’s current strengths and offered ideas around emerging opportunities as well as areas for continued development. These insights reflect what the YEC Team had heard from Commissioners, partners, and community stakeholders across the state. The following sections summarize key takeaways and recommendations within each framework dimension, offering direction for how the Commission could build on its foundation over calendar year 2025 and into 2026 to advance its vision for California’s youth.

## POLICY & FUNDING

California youth face persistent barriers in accessing education, mental health support, and other essential services, with marginalized youth often encountering the greatest challenges. Youth policy often focuses on crisis response rather than prevention, and funding instability limits the reach and quality of programs. The Commission is working toward developing strategies to reduce these barriers, strengthen preventative support networks, and center marginalized youth in the decision-making or policy advocating processes. Clearer funding pathways reinforced by accountability and stronger local networks would help maintain effective programs and help scale them up if they are not already working across the state.

### Key Findings

1. Commissioners and community members identified **education and mental health challenges** as the two top issues adversely affecting young people in California.
2. While many youth programs and services currently exist, many also contain **barriers to access**, especially for marginalized youth.
3. Youth policies often focus on responding to youth after a crisis; initiatives are needed that focus on **preventative care for youth** before crises happen.
4. **Funding is a key lever in maintaining access and quality** of youth programs and services.
5. Rural youth commissions often have difficulty acquiring funding and rely on **a variety of funding sources** to piece together a budget.

### Key Recommendations for Visioning

- Explore opportunities to **reduce barriers to access across policy, funding, youth engagement, and partnership strategies** in the Strategic Plan
- Build a **strategy that centers marginalized youth**, with the understanding that doing so ultimately benefits all young people
- Examine the youth policy landscape to identify strategies for closing gaps in **preventative care interventions for young people** before they enter crisis
- Consider focusing the Commission’s work on building **clear funding pathways as a strategy to strengthen local community and commission networks**

## PARTNERSHIPS

The Commission has the foundation to build an ecosystem of partners that reach youth from across the state, but awareness of the Commission is currently limited. Local youth and community organizations have encouraged the Commission to collaborate rather than duplicate efforts. This early partnership-building as the Commission came into existence created immediate opportunities for youth engagement while supporting existing initiatives by the partners. By connecting with youth commissions and other youth-led programs, the Commission expanded its reach throughout the period of this report, strengthened its local networks, and began advancing a plan to better focus on policy, funding, and engagement priorities.

### Key Findings

1. The Commission is well-positioned for impact as it has the **initial components for building an ecosystem of partners** that help the Commission meet youth where they are throughout the state.
2. However, **awareness of the Commission** is currently low throughout the state and currently a key determining factor in how quickly the Commission is able to operate.
3. Youth and community organizations encourage the Commission to **support existing organizations and caution against duplicating efforts**.
4. A key opportunity to support existing organizations and begin activating youth engagement may be to **engage local youth commissions**.

### Key Recommendations for Visioning

- Emphasize **partnership-building as a key strategy** for the Commission to fulfill its policy, funding, and youth engagement charge
- Prioritize partnership-building as a foundational need, and plan to **focus on it in the early years** of the Strategic Plan
- Identify **immediate and manageable, yet impactful youth engagement opportunities** to begin building progress without waiting until the Strategic Plan is completed
- Consider how **existing youth-led initiatives, youth-serving organizations, and local youth commissions** connect to the work of the Commission

## YOUTH & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Youth often feel disconnected and powerless in civic spaces where people engage in political, social or cultural activities. Opportunities for participation are frequently short-term rather than sustained. The Commission is still building its internal structures and support to facilitate meaningful youth engagement, especially in formal decision-making. During the next Annual Report, the Commission plans to focus its work on strategies that cultivate hope, sustain youth involvement, and support those who wish to participate more fully in civic engagement initiatives. By acting as a bridge between local communities and county youth commissions, the Commission will also expand youth influences and foster stronger statewide networks for civic engagement.

### Key Findings

- Commissioners described youth as feeling **disconnected and disillusioned with civic engagement** and feeling powerless in their ability to change systems.
- Even for many who are civically engaged, opportunities are often **single points in time**, rather than sustained engagements that create opportunities to be fully engaged throughout the decision-making process.
- The Commission is currently designing meaningful youth engagement opportunities, which will require both a **youth-appropriate structure and youth support**, especially when trying to find appropriate in-person meeting spaces.
- While many youth commissions share similar priority issue areas and approaches, they do not have **access to clear channels for collaboration**.

### Key Recommendations for Visioning

- Explore youth and community engagement strategies that **instill hope and, by extension, cultivate youth activation**
- Build an approach for the Commission to balance **responding to the needs of youth today, while working towards longer-term policy change**
- Build a youth engagement approach around **sustaining youth involvement in State decision-making**
- Incorporate strategies that not only focus on youth outreach but also **emphasize supporting youth** who do engage with the Commission
- Consider the Commission serving as a **bridge-builder for local communities and commission networks** in youth and community engagement strategy

## CAPACITY-BUILDING

Because the Commission met for the first time in late fall 2024, much of 2025 was spent assessing the Commissioners’ mix of skills and perspectives. The YEC Team also increased its staff from one in 2024 to four in 2025 (with additional consultant support) to provide the capacity needed to manage workload and deliver on priorities. For 2026, a greater focus on identified strategic priorities will allow the Commission to maximize its impact while continuing to build trust and sustainability with other youth leaders and young people in California. Future efforts in calendar years 2026 and 2027 will be centered on aligning priorities, designing structures that reflect continued limited staff capacity, and embedding capacity-building practices into the Commission’s governance structure. Strengthening internal capacity by the end of 2026 would further allow the Commission to model effective youth-led State initiatives while building on its goals.

### Key Findings

1. The Commission has the **collective skills, experiences, and perspectives across Commissioners and staff** to become a model for effective youth-led State efforts.
2. The Commission urgently needs **more staff** to meet workload demands and build a sustainable foundation.
3. Commissioners, staff, and key collaborators alike recognized the importance of **focusing Commission priorities** to be able to deliver on its commitments, thereby building trust and maximizing impact.
4. Several county youth commissions have created **governance structures to focus on their critical operations**, especially legislative affairs and community relations, in addition to specific issue areas.

### Key Recommendations for Visioning

- Design strategic planning activities that **value the unique perspectives of Commissioners and staff** to facilitate innovative strategy development
- Design a Strategic Plan that is **feasible with and reflective of limited staff capacity** in the intermediate term
- Align on an **approach to balancing varied priorities as a Commission** as a foundation to establish who the Commission is\*
- Consider creating Commission roles and practices that **embed capacity-building into the Commission’s governance structure**

*\*E.g., urgent action vs. longer-term policy change, preventative vs. reactive policy, basic needs vs. broader societal needs*

# Our Story of Tomorrow: Visioning

Between January and May 2025, the Commission engaged in a series of workshops to envision its future impact and define strategic directions. Commissioners and community members explored trends shaping youth experiences, mapped the systems influencing their work, and identified practical, forward-looking actions to advance youth well-being across the state. Across these conversations, key themes emerged, including building youth power, centering marginalized youth, meeting youth where they are, acting as a bridge for local organizations, and driving impact through policy and systems change. The insights gathered during this phase provide the foundation for the Commission's strategic priorities and the actions that will guide its work over the next five years.

## Our Visioning Process

In Phase 2, Commissioners and community members engaged in a series of workshops to shape the Commission's vision for the future. Each session provided an opportunity to reflect on current trends, explore the systems influencing youth well-being, and identify actions that will advance the Commission's goals. Together, these activities generated insights that directly informed the Commission's strategic priorities and long-term planning.

## Visioning Themes

Across the Phase 2 workshops, several key themes emerged that reflect the Commission's priorities for advancing youth well-being in California. These themes capture the principles and approaches that will guide the Commission's strategic actions over the next five years.

**Build youth power:** The Commission seeks to create opportunities for youth to lead, make decisions, and influence the systems that affect their lives.

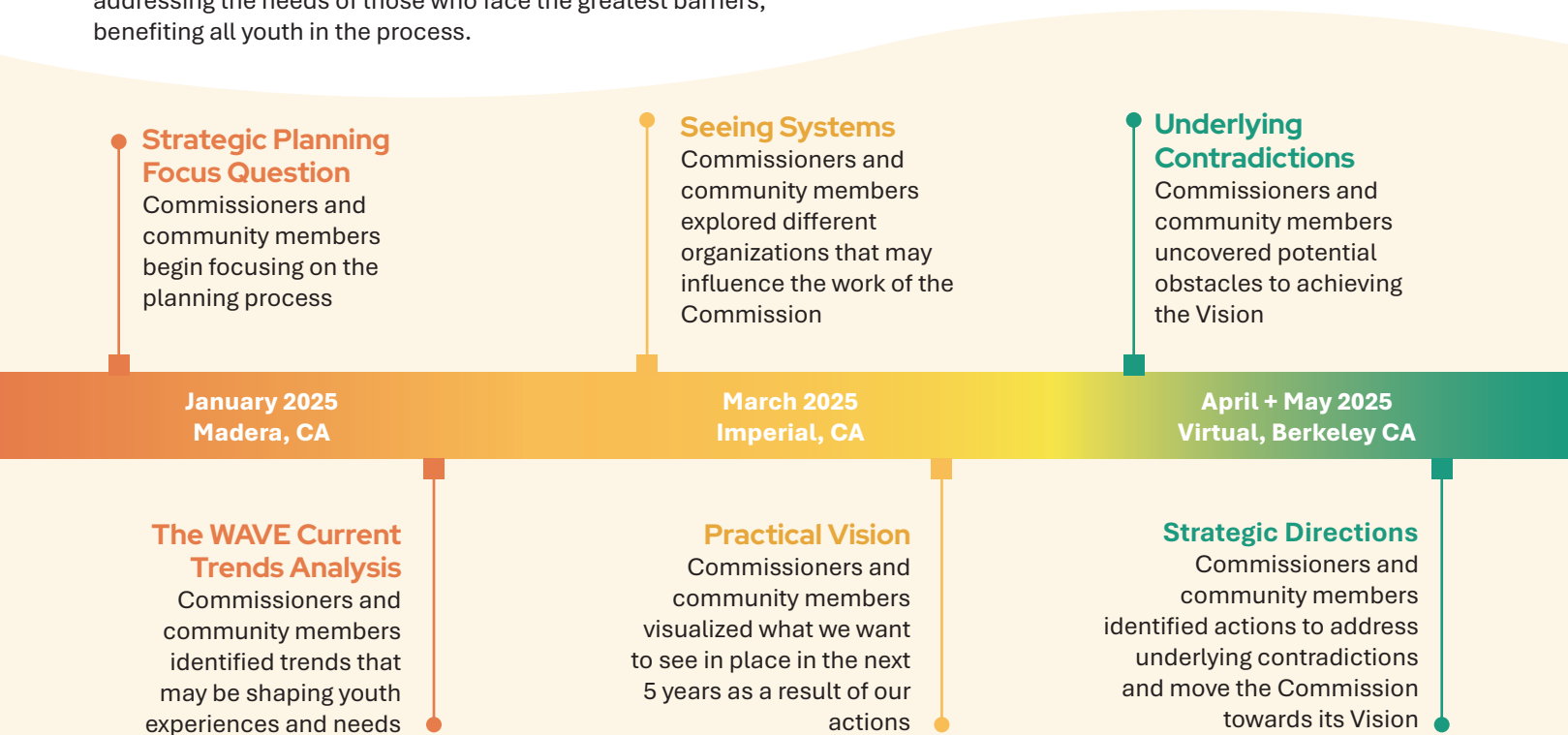
**Center marginalized youth, and prioritize equity and access:** Policies, programs, and initiatives should focus on addressing the needs of those who face the greatest barriers, benefiting all youth in the process.

**Meet youth where they are:** Strategies should reflect the diverse experiences, locations, and needs of young people across the state.

**Be a bridge; connect and amplify the efforts of local youth-serving organizations:** The Commission can strengthen impact by linking local efforts, sharing resources, and elevating existing youth leadership initiatives.

**Drive impact through policy and systems change:** The Commission aims to influence legislative and institutional systems to create lasting improvements in youth well-being

The Phase 2 visioning activities culminated in a draft strategic plan that reflected the insights, priorities, and themes identified throughout the workshops. This draft was refined through several rounds of review and iteration with Commissioners, staff, and community stakeholders to strengthen clarity, focus, and alignment with the Commission's mission. The resulting Strategic Plan captures the Commission's goals, objectives, and guiding principles, providing a roadmap for advancing youth well-being across California over the coming years.



# Our Path to Tomorrow: 2025-2030 Strategic Plan

## MISSION

We uplift the voices and leadership of California's youth – especially those from marginalized communities – by shaping policy, strengthening civic engagement, and creating equitable access to opportunities that build youth power and well-being. We do this by upholding our charge outlined within AB-46 (2021).

## VISION

A California where all youth thrive in just, inclusive systems that reflect their lived experiences and support their futures.

## CORE VALUES



## GOALS

GOAL 1	GOAL 2	GOAL 3	GOAL 4	GOAL 5
Strengthen youth-related policy and legislation to expand equitable access to youth programs and services.	Examine and inform the State budgets that respond to youth needs.	Advance youth participation and leadership in sustained, meaningful civic engagement, with a focus on marginalized and underrepresented youth.	Grow the capacity and collaboration of youth-serving organizations to meet youth needs and maximize impact.	Build the operations of the Commission to stay effective and sustain impact over time.
<p><b>1.1</b> Increase Commission and community understanding of the State policymaking process.</p> <p><b>1.2</b> Provide State decision-makers with youth-informed insights and policy proposals to both remove systemic obstacles to existing services and create or expand programs that reflect emerging youth identified needs.</p> <p><b>1.3</b> Bring the needs and successes of youth-serving organizations to State decision-makers.</p>	<p><b>2.1</b> Increase Commission and community understanding of how State funds are allocated to support youth well-being.</p> <p><b>2.2</b> Enhance pathways to elevate youth and community voice in Commission budget recommendations.</p>	<p><b>3.1</b> Build equitable partnerships with policy and civic groups to grow civically-engaged youth leaders.</p> <p><b>3.2</b> Collaborate with State, local, and community groups on youth-centered campaigns that share meaningful youth civic engagement opportunities.</p> <p><b>3.3</b> Promote youth leadership efforts to inspire more youth to participate in civic engagement.</p>	<p><b>4.1</b> Support resource- and knowledge-sharing across youth-serving groups so they can learn from each other.</p> <p><b>4.2</b> Share funding opportunities to grow and sustain local youth commissions.</p> <p><b>4.3</b> Create a fund to provide grants to organizations and programs that serve marginalized youth.</p>	<p><b>5.1</b> Build a website that keeps youth informed about updates, opportunities, and outcomes.</p> <p><b>5.2</b> Secure funding to support continued Commission operations.</p> <p><b>5.3</b> Add staff and tools to manage programs, support youth engagement, and sustain growth.</p> <p><b>5.4</b> Partner with State and community organizations to spread awareness of programs and services.</p>



# Best Practices for Youth Engagement



## A Letter from Commissioner Avanti Ramraj

Through my service on the California Youth Empowerment Commission, I learned that meaningful youth engagement begins with listening, truly hearing the lived experiences of young people and allowing those experiences to inform action. Many young people across California have valuable insights about the challenges facing their schools, families, and communities, yet they often lack consistent opportunities to share those perspectives with public leaders. One of the most effective approaches to youth engagement is creating intentional spaces where young people feel safe sharing their experiences and know that those experiences will be taken seriously.

Listening sessions hosted through the Commission demonstrated how powerful these spaces can be. When youth are invited into conversations with policymakers, educators, and community leaders, they bring perspectives that data alone cannot capture. These conversations help reveal the real impacts of policies and highlight areas where communities need support. Expanding structured youth listening sessions across California, particularly in partnership with schools, youth organizations, and community groups, would provide more opportunities for young people to share their perspectives directly with decision-makers.

However, listening alone is not enough. Youth engagement should also include opportunities for young people to actively contribute ideas and solutions. Creating platforms for youth to give presentations, lead discussions, and share research on issues affecting their communities can strengthen civic participation and leadership. Through the Commission, we saw how powerful it can be when youth are encouraged to speak publicly about issues they care about and present their ideas directly to public leaders. These opportunities should be expanded so that youth across the state can participate in civic dialogue, including younger students who often have thoughtful insights and meaningful lived experiences to share.

To further strengthen youth engagement statewide, California should consider several practical steps:

- Expand regional youth listening sessions hosted in partnership with schools, community organizations, and local governments to ensure youth from diverse communities can share their perspectives with public leaders.
- Create youth civic presentation opportunities, such as youth policy forums or community hearings, where young people can present research, give speeches, and discuss issues affecting their communities.
- Establish mentorship and civic education support, pairing youth leaders with mentors who can help them navigate policy conversations and translate their ideas into recommendations.
- Develop systems to share youth input with policymakers, including summaries of youth listening sessions and recommendations that can inform state and local decision-making.

My experience on the Commission showed me that young people can play an important role in shaping the conversations that influence policy when they are given the opportunity to participate meaningfully. In many ways, youth engagement works best when there are individuals and institutions willing to serve as a bridge between lived experience and policymaking, helping translate the insights of young people into ideas that public leaders can understand and act upon.

When young people are trusted to share their perspectives and participate in civic discussions, they illuminate the issues affecting their communities most deeply. Strengthening these pathways for engagement will help ensure that California's youth are not only heard, but empowered to contribute to the future of their communities and the state as a whole.

Respectfully,

**Avanti Ramraj**  
California Youth Empowerment Commissioner

Photos: October 24, 2025 - Riverside  
Voices for Change Forum: The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture

# Recommendations From the Commission

Drawing from the lived experiences of Commissioners and insights gathered through community-based listening sessions, the following best practices reflect strategies that have proven effective in reaching youth who are historically underserved, underrepresented, or disconnected from traditional systems of engagement. Commissioners emphasized that meaningful youth engagement requires intentional outreach, culturally responsive approaches, and the removal of practical barriers to participation. These recommendations are offered to the Governor's Office, the State Legislature, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and other state leaders as actionable strategies to strengthen youth voice in public decision-making and program design statewide.



## 1 Meet Youth Where They Are - Physically, Culturally, and Digitally

Effective engagement begins by recognizing that underserved youth often face barriers related to geography, technology access, trust in institutions, and competing responsibilities. State agencies and programs should prioritize outreach in community-based settings, such as schools, community centers, tribal lands, and youth-serving organizations, and expand communication through platforms youth already use.

### Recommended Actions:

- Conduct outreach and engagement activities in local communities rather than relying solely on centralized or state-level venues.
- Invest in youth-centered communication strategies, including social media platforms and digital tools commonly used by young people.
- Provide information in accessible formats such as short videos, infographics, and multilingual materials.
- Partner with trusted community organizations and youth leaders to build credibility and increase participation.

## 2 Remove Practical Barriers to Participation

Many underserved youth want to engage but face logistical challenges such as transportation, scheduling conflicts, food insecurity, or limited financial resources. Addressing these barriers is one of the most direct ways to expand equitable participation.

### Recommended Actions:

- Provide transportation support, transit stipends, or local travel coordination for youth attending engagement events.
- Offer meals or refreshments at meetings and community gatherings to reduce participation burdens.
- Schedule events at times that accommodate school, work, and family responsibilities.
- Provide stipends, gift cards, or service-learning credit to recognize youth contributions and time.
- Ensure participation opportunities are free and accessible to all youth.

## 3 Create Welcoming and Youth-Centered Environments

Youth engagement is most effective when spaces feel safe, inclusive, and culturally relevant. Commissioners highlighted that youth are more likely to participate when engagement activities incorporate creativity, self-expression, and peer connection.

### Recommended Actions:

- Integrate art, music, storytelling, and creative activities into engagement events to foster connection and expression.
- Design interactive, hands-on activities that encourage participation rather than passive observation.
- Provide opportunities for youth leadership and peer facilitation.
- Recognize and celebrate youth talents, including visual arts, spoken word, and cultural expression.

## 4 Ensure Accessibility and Inclusion for All Youth

Underserved youth include those with disabilities, language barriers, or learning differences. Engagement strategies must be designed to ensure all young people can meaningfully participate.

### Recommended Actions:

- Provide language interpretation and translation services for in-person and virtual engagement opportunities.
- Ensure materials are accessible for youth with learning disabilities and diverse learning styles.
- Offer both in-person and virtual participation options to expand access across geographic regions.
- Use clear, structured agendas and communication to help youth understand expectations and feel confident participating.

## 5 Center Youth Voice in Decision-Making - Not Just Participation

Youth engagement is most impactful when young people see that their input leads to real action. Commissioners emphasized that youth must be treated as partners in shaping programs, policies, and services.

### Recommended Actions:

- Provide feedback to youth on how their input was used to inform decisions or program changes.
- Include youth representatives in advisory bodies, planning committees, and program design processes.
- Create ongoing engagement opportunities rather than one-time events.
- Build leadership pathways that allow youth to grow from participants to decision-makers.

## 6 Recognize and Support Youth Leadership and Community Contribution

Engagement should also create opportunities for youth to build skills, confidence, and pathways to future success.

### Recommended Actions:

- Offer community service hours or leadership recognition for participation in civic engagement activities.
- Provide mentorship and career exploration opportunities connected to engagement initiatives.
- Connect youth to workforce development, internships, and service-learning opportunities.
- Highlight youth contributions publicly to reinforce the value of their participation.

Together, these best practices reflect a simple but powerful principle: When youth are supported, respected, and meaningfully included, they become partners in strengthening communities and shaping a more responsive and equitable systems and state government.



# Partnership Spotlight: Advancing Youth Engagement Through the State of Engagement Initiative

The Youth Empowerment Commission's partnership with the UC Berkeley Possibility Lab represents a significant step forward in strengthening youth-centered civic engagement across California. Through collaboration with state agencies and researchers, the Commission was featured in the Possibility Lab's *State of Engagement Report* as a case study highlighting innovative approaches to participatory governance and community outreach. This recognition positioned the Commission among a select group of statewide initiatives identified as advancing inclusive, intentional, and innovative engagement practices designed to build trust between government and communities.

The report underscores the Commission's core purpose of providing meaningful opportunities for civic engagement that improve the quality of life for California's youth, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, whose voices are often underrepresented in traditional decision-making processes. It highlights the Commission's practice of traveling to communities across the state to engage youth directly, collaborating with local organizations, and ensuring that engagement opportunities are accessible to young people regardless of geography or background.

Importantly, the partnership with the Possibility Lab demonstrates how youth engagement can serve as a model for broader state efforts to strengthen civic participation. The report identifies youth-centered initiatives, such as the Youth Empowerment Commission and #CaliforniansForAll College Corps, as examples of how investing in engagement infrastructure, leadership development, and community partnerships can expand participation and create pathways for young people to contribute to public problem-solving. These initiatives illustrate that meaningful engagement requires dedicated resources, intentional design, and sustained collaboration between government, community organizations, and young people themselves.

## Best Practice Takeaways for State Leaders

The Commission's inclusion in the *State of Engagement Report* offers several key lessons for strengthening youth engagement statewide that are in alignment with the YEC's recommendations for State Leaders:

### Invest in Civic Infrastructure for Youth Participation

- Sustainable engagement requires dedicated funding, staffing, and coordination to support youth involvement over time.
- Building systems for engagement, rather than relying on one-time outreach, creates long-term pathways for youth leadership and participation.

### Bring Government to Communities, Not Just Communities to Government

- Traveling to local communities and hosting meetings in accessible locations increases participation and demonstrates respect for community voice.
- Regional engagement helps ensure that rural, tribal, and historically underserved communities are included in statewide conversations.

### Design Engagement with Equity and Inclusion at the Center

- Engagement strategies should prioritize youth from marginalized communities and remove barriers to participation through accessible locations, language support, and culturally responsive practices.
- Representation across geography, culture, and lived experience strengthens the legitimacy and effectiveness of public decision-making.

### Position Youth as Co-Creators in Public Policy and Programs

- Youth engagement is most impactful when young people are involved early in the development of policies and initiatives, not only consulted after decisions are made.
- Co-creation builds trust, strengthens program design, and ensures that solutions reflect real community needs.

Together, the Commission's partnership with the Possibility Lab and its recognition in the *State of Engagement Report* affirm that youth engagement is not simply an activity, it is an essential component of responsive, equitable governance and a foundational investment in California's future.

# Looking Ahead: The Roadmap for 2026 through 2027

## Post Enactment Implementation

For the remainder of 2026, the Commission will be focusing its work on issues related to recently enacted legislation affecting youth ages 14–25. This age group represents a critical transition period between adolescence and adulthood in which policy decisions related to housing, mental health, and education can have significant long-term effects on economic mobility, health outcomes, and civic participation.

The Commission recognizes the significant efforts of the Governor, California legislators, and many others to advance policies that support young people across the state. Lawmakers have enacted a range of important legislation in recent years to address housing stability, behavioral health, and educational access. Commissioners have also been aware that the perspectives of youth with lived experience, particularly those facing additional barriers such as housing instability, involvement in foster care or the juvenile justice systems, or limited access to supportive services, are not being heard throughout the policymaking and implementation process.

As the Commission looks ahead in the priority areas that it can be most impactful, it will be focused on ways to strengthen opportunities for these youth voices to inform policy development. For 2026 efforts, Commissioners will be identifying and evaluating recently enacted legislation and policies to demonstrate how they might best reflect the lived experiences of the young people they were intending to serve. Enacting new policies can have unintended consequences and can continue to place barriers for success. The perspectives from the people who are most directly impacted need to be heard.

The Commission will take action to elevate these voices by engaging with and documenting concerns about post-enactment legislation or policies. The Commission will seek out affected youth, their communities, and youth organizations and provide a venue by offering at least four listening sessions during the 2026-2027 Commission meetings. Through this process, the Commission expects to be able to more quickly identify the most significant issues in its priorities areas, determine the barriers to implementation, and articulate the opportunities for policy refinement during each legislative session beginning in 2027.

The intent of these listening sessions is to prioritize and elevate the lived experiences of transition-age youth to decision makers. This is important for all youth in California, but it becomes especially critical for those who face additional barriers such as those navigating the foster care system, involved in the juvenile justice system, or experiencing challenges in mental health.

## Tracking and Influencing Legislation

Starting with the 2027 legislative session, one of the goals of the Commission is to engage directly with policy makers, youth organizations, and communities to expand equitable access to youth programs and services. The Commission will advance this effort by 1) increasing Commissioners' and their communities' understanding of the State policymaking process, 2) providing California decision-makers with youth-informed insights and policy proposals to both remove systemic obstacles to existing services and create or expand programs that reflect emerging youth identified needs, and 3) bringing the needs and successes of youth-serving organizations to decision-makers.

One of the expected tasks of AB 46 is for the Commission to provide model legislation and advocacy for the needs of young people. At their November 2025 meeting, Commissioners were introduced to a draft Legislative Engagement Plan to start planning how to best organize themselves to advance and advocate for priority youth initiatives in the California Legislature. An approach for prioritizing legislation and a method for tracking bills were presented for consideration. The proposed plan also provided a high-level overview of the California legislative process and provided some possible metrics Commissioners could use to help rank bills with the greatest impact.

The Commissioners requested additional guidance be provided in the Legislative Engagement Plan on how to:

- Build relationships with legislators and staff
- Determine which legislators are open to collaboration
- Partner with other advocacy organizations
- Understand what bills those organizations are following and supporting
- Create a public-facing bill tracking tool
- Record communications Commissioners receive from community members
- Add the Commission's position and each Commissioner's vote on the bill tracking tool
- Make the Commission's legislative tracking easy to understand and accessible on the website
- Address urgency of the legislative schedule
- Support requests to sit on panels during committee meetings
- Develop a web portal to get input from youth
- Consider official Commissioner comments during hearings

The discussion around the draft Legislative Engagement Plan led to the 1) YEC team reaching out to youth organizations, 2) the development of an internal process to avoid potential for overlap between Commissioners engaging policymakers directly, and 3) more support for how Commissioners might bring the voices of disconnected and disadvantaged youth to policymakers in a more influential, united way.

To address this, the YEC Team engaged with California Coalition for Youth (CalYouth), Generation Up (GENup), Youth Build, and Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) to begin the conversations about the legislative process and to inform the Commissioners about their experiences.

The YEC team also developed two worksheets that Commissioners will use when they request meetings with members of the California Legislature and to document the outcomes of those meetings. The worksheets create a coordinated, transparent process for all Commissioners (now and future) to learn from and build on. The worksheets also help create alignment with the YEC Team and the GO-Serve Legislative Team by confirming that initial meetings are appropriately framed as relationship-building and information-gathering.

The Legislative Engagement Plan will also be revised in 2026 to address the learnings and to add additional information that the Commissioners can use to support the Commission's priorities.

## Policy Partnerships

As this year unfolds, the Commission will be seeking opportunities to partner with lawmakers and others to develop youth-crafted resolutions or model legislation that advance priority policy issues. Priority policy issues will be determined each year by the Commissioners. The process will be described in the Legislative Engagement Plan that the Commissioners have evaluated in an evidence-based method and found to be equitable and grounded in real experience by California youth.

These next two years (2026 and 2027) are also a time when the Commission will be seeking closer partnership opportunities with other youth organizations that have been legislatively active either at the state or local level. One of the goals for 2026 is for the Commission to consider how it can adopt similar best practices or approaches to enhance its overall impact and not duplicate effort. The intent is to increase the Commission's feedback about priority legislation and for Commissioners to engage their communities on the bills that may be the most impactful. Common themes heard from the advocacy groups about their approaches to legislation were:

Getting feedback from youth in their communities on policy issues

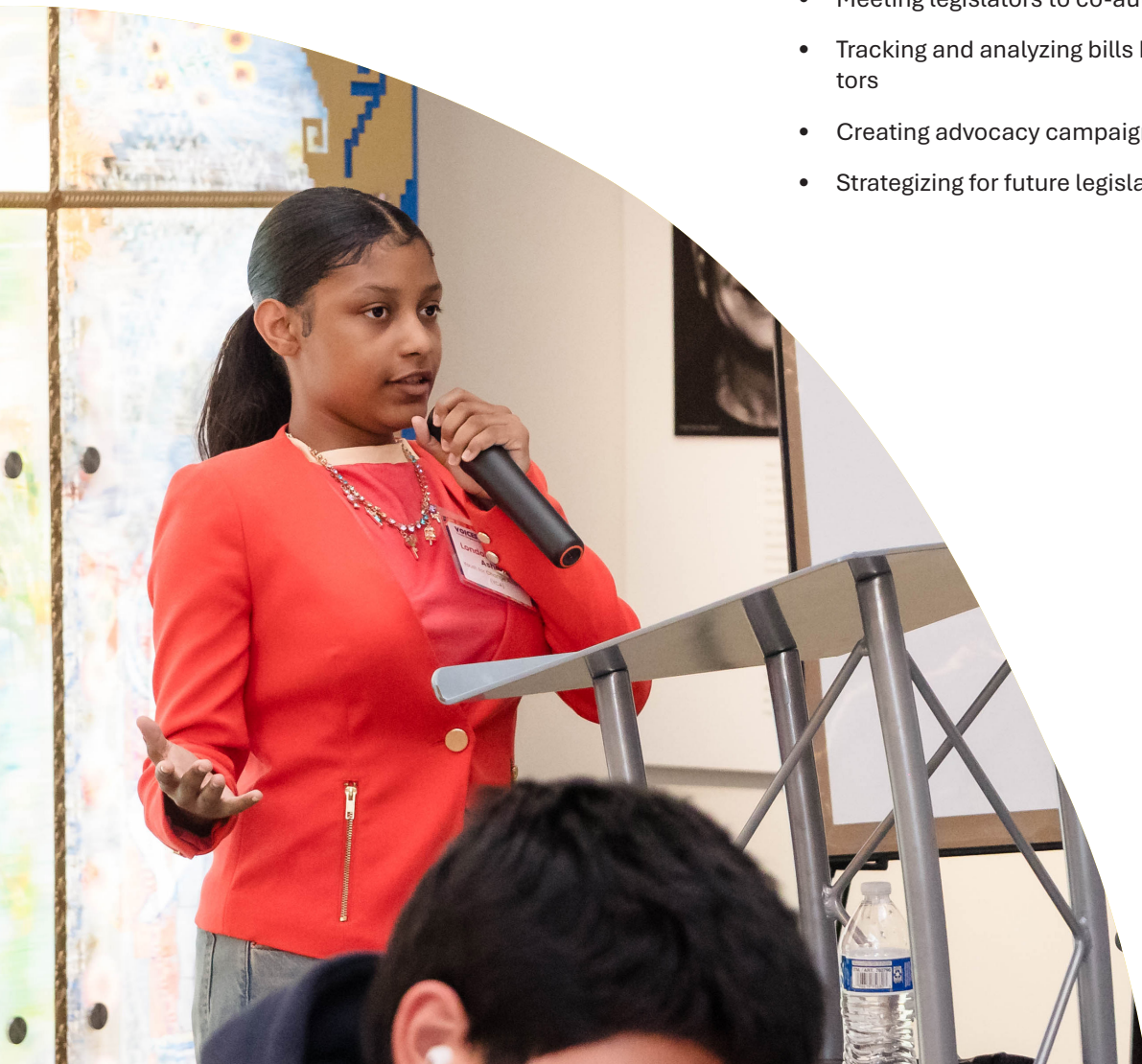
- Developing a Policy Platform for priority legislation
- Meeting legislators to co-author bills or lend support
- Tracking and analyzing bills by youth-led legislative directors
- Creating advocacy campaigns within their communities
- Strategizing for future legislative sessions

# The Youth Empowerment Commission Team



Left to right, top to bottom: **Thomisha Wallace**, Executive Director; **Jennifer Serano**, Senior Program Analyst; **Sean Hamner**, Associate Program Analyst; **Savannah Morse**, Program Analyst; **Raynell Davis**, Executive Assistant; **Joyce Chiao**, Strategic Planning Consultant; **Carliane Johnson**, Policy Consultant

Biographies for staff are provided on the YEC website at [YouthEmpowerment.ca.gov/commission/](https://YouthEmpowerment.ca.gov/commission/).





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