



What does it truly mean to be youth-led?

It's a phrase that appears often in mission statements and program descriptions, but genuinely youth-led spaces are far rarer than people realize. Creating environments where young people not only participate, but actually lead, requires adults to share power, trust lived experience, and make room for youth voices to shape decisions in meaningful ways.

For 20 years, Community Works' ProjectWHAT! program has been doing exactly that.

ProjectWHAT! is built around a cascading mentorship model where young people lead and support one another. Peer mentors, youth who have been part of the program for several years, guide advanced youth advocates, who in turn mentor newer participants. Together, they build community, discuss challenges at home and school, prepare presentations, organize advocacy efforts, and support one another through some of life's most difficult moments.

In ProjectWHAT!, young people help determine the agenda for meetings. They decide which issues they want to advocate around. They shape workshops, trainings, and public presentations. Their voices are not symbolic additions to the program; they are central to it.

That matters deeply for children of incarcerated parents.

Parental incarceration is considered an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), one that can disrupt every part of a young person's life. Housing, school stability, family relationships, safety, and emotional well-being can suddenly shift, often without the child having any say in the decisions affecting them. Many young people carry feelings of shame, grief, isolation, and powerlessness during formative years of development.

Youth-led spaces help restore something essential: agency.

ProjectWHAT! recognizes lived experience as expertise. It reminds young people that their ideas matter, their stories matter, and their leadership matters. Through this process, participants develop confidence, resilience, public speaking skills, project management experience, civic engagement knowledge, and a deeper belief in their own ability to create change.

And the impact reaches far beyond the walls of the program.

ProjectWHAT! youth leaders have facilitated workshops for adult practitioners on how to better support children of incarcerated parents and create more affirming environments for system-impacted youth. Youth have led panels and workshops at national conferences, including the National Children of Incarcerated Parents Conference in partnership with the Osborne Association, where they shared strategies for designing civic engagement programs that authentically center youth voice and shared power.

Every day, these young people show up not only for themselves, but for peers navigating similar challenges and for countless youth who have not yet found their voice.

When we trust young people with leadership, they rise to meet it.

During Community Works' \$25K in 25 Days campaign, we invite you to support programs like ProjectWHAT! that empower system-impacted youth to lead with courage, compassion, and vision.

Your donation helps create spaces where young people build confidence, discover their power, strengthen community, and become the next generation of leaders and changemakers.