

EMPOWER

INSIGHTS FROM YOUTH TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES



LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE FROM PARACHUTE TO ASPEN, COLORADO

YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE A LOT TO SAY, AND THEY WANT TO BE HEARD.

980
surveys
completed
by youth

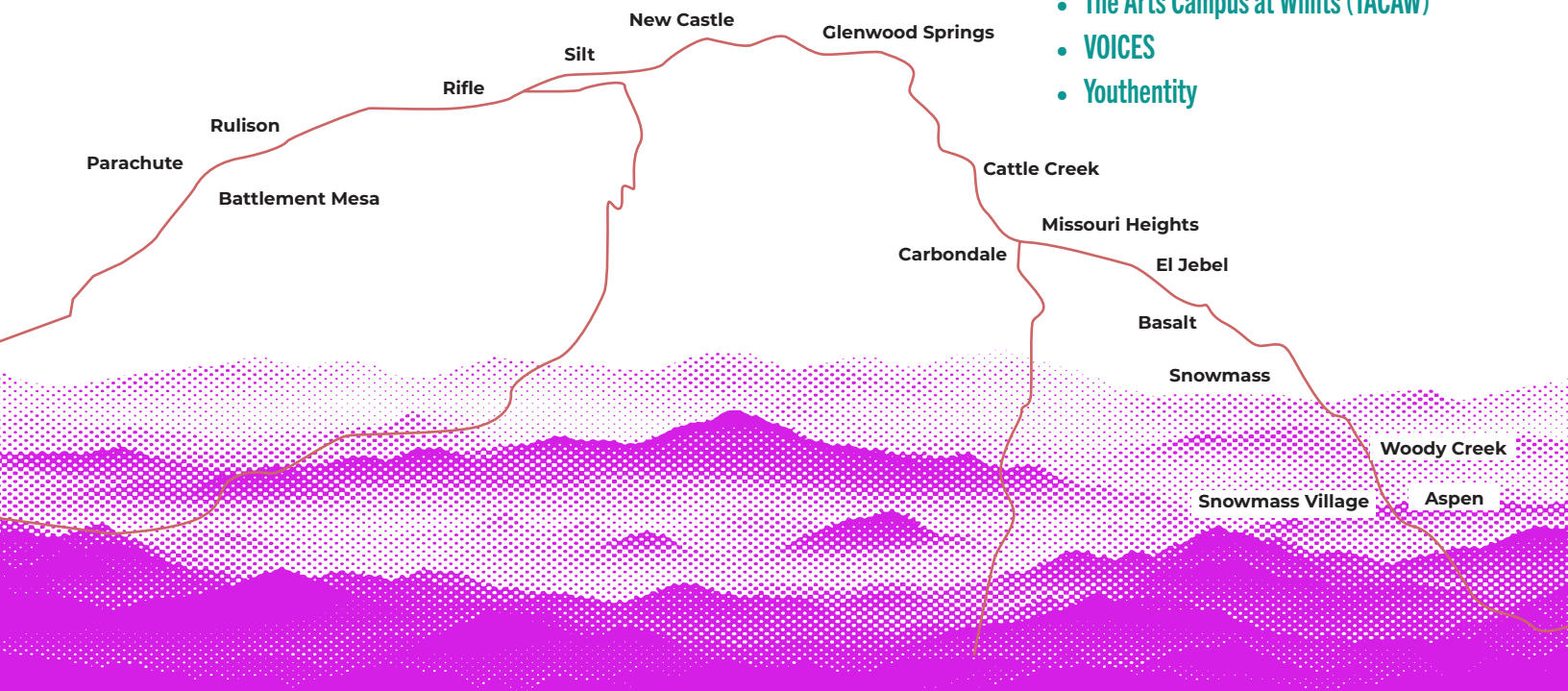
20
focus group
sessions
facilitated

174
youth
interviewed

EMPOWER grew out of the **Youth Empowerment Alliance**, a group of 21 youth-serving nonprofit organizations from the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys (Parachute to Aspen) who gathered for a year to learn together. Through those conversations, it became clear that we needed to hear more directly from young people. In 2025, more than 1,200 youth (12-18 years old) shared their perspectives, the barriers they face, and what would help them thrive.

The Youth Empowerment Alliance is supported by the **Jonathan D + Mark C. Lewis Foundation** and the **Aspen Community Foundation**, and nurtured by the following partners:

- Aspen Center for Environmental Studies
- Aspen Community Programs at the Aspen Institute
- Aspen Family Connections
- Anderson Ranch Arts Center
- Aspen Science Center
- Aspen Valley Land Trust
- Aspen Valley Ski and Snowboard Club
- Buddy Program
- Carbondale Arts
- Challenge Aspen
- Cook Inclusive
- Farm Collaborative
- Garfield 16 School-Based Family Resource Center
- Highwater Farm
- Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers
- Roaring Fork PreCollegiate
- Roaring Fork School District Family Resource Center
- Stepping Stones
- The Arts Campus at Willits (TACAW)
- VOICES
- Youthentity



UNDER PRESSURE

Youth are seeking tools to deal with the pressures they're facing, and the space to take a deep breath when they need it.

A lack of time is the number one thing holding students back from joining activities they're interested in, and hundreds of young people

asked for more mental health resources, suggesting additional school-based counselors, support groups, and drop-in therapy programs.

Youth want more help with life skills, and career preparation — practical tips to manage their lives right now and plan for the future.

A DAY IN THEIR LIVES



...I'm so tired.
Breakfast? Maybe.
30 minutes until the bus...
and I need to use the
bathroom, and my sister is
always hogging it!

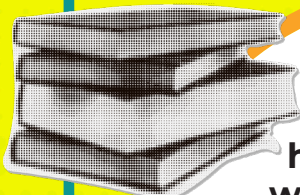


School doesn't start 'til 8...
I don't really live that far away
BUT my bus ride takes 45 minutes in
the morning, because buses are limited
and mine goes on an extra long route.

I'm late! Again! The
bus got stuck in traffic.
Again. A full day
of classes ahead.

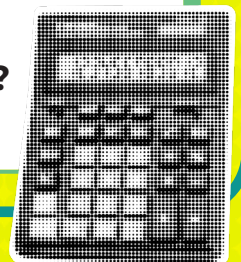


I have soccer,
then theatre,
and a job.
My parents work
'til 6 today, and I
have to babysit.



Now time for my
homework...What do I
want to do with my life?
I just want the chance to
think, or simply be.

Hmmm. How will algebra
help me understand
how to file my taxes?



BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

Youth described challenges to participating in opportunities they care about.

TIME

Imagine a dream opportunity might be just around the corner — the kind of thing that you always wanted to do, that could help you **become the person you want to be**. Maybe it's an art class, an education series, or an outdoor camp. Maybe it's a chance to share your ideas with local leaders and shape the future of your community. If only there was more time to engage.

COMMUNICATION

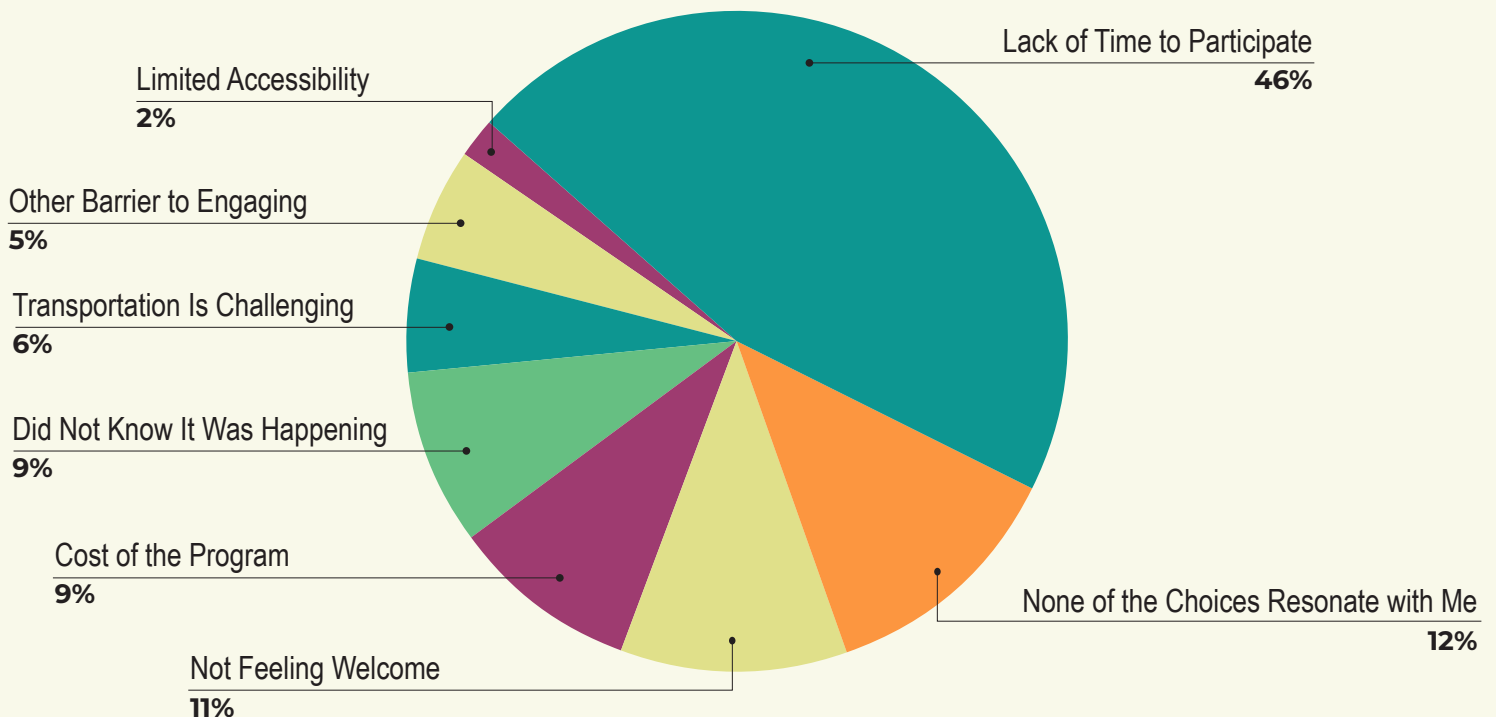
Parents may not always catch these opportunities in the newsletters they receive. If organizations aren't

plugged into school — putting up posters, talking to teachers, making announcements over the loudspeaker — **opportunities are left up to word of mouth**.

TRANSPORTATION

Even if young people discover opportunities, they may be happening in the next town, maybe it's a 20- to 30-minute drive...on a good day. **School buses often aren't a viable option**. Districts only have so many buses and drivers, making scheduling inconvenient for families. Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA) and municipal partners offer bus routes from Aspen to Rifle, CO. Some communities — like Parachute — are not connected to the RFTA

WHAT LIMITS YOUTH FROM JOINING ACTIVITIES?





Youth at Stepping Stones' new Glenwood Springs drop-in center.

system or have very limited services, making it difficult for youth to access programs. **Public transportation also takes extra time, and for young people, it doesn't always feel safe** — especially after dark. Organizations may not be able to organize shuttles and carpools or take on the liability of transporting youth.

A youth alliance member said, "I used to take the bus, and I was late everyday. It was the schools' bus. We're short on buses, so they do all the routes— middle, elementary, high school—all at the same time. I'd wait 45 minutes just to get picked up after school, and I didn't get home until 4:30pm."

COST

While **some programs are free, or even pay students to participate, others come with a steep price tag** and may require cash upfront even when applying for a scholarship. And the scholarship process may be complicated or ask for information families cannot provide.

BELONGING

Sometimes **programs and spaces can feel cliquey, hard to fit in, less welcoming** for young people or mixed groups of peers.

How do we truly give everyone a chance to thrive?



“Not feeling welcome is really one of the big reasons why a lot of people might not want to join a program.”

— SAMANTHA, A SENIOR AT GRAND VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL



Interns leading STEM activities in Aspen with Aspen Science Center.

MEETING THE NEED

Addressing the challenges youth described will require coordination and resources that address transportation, location, and cost barriers, as well as environments and relationships that foster trust and belonging.

SUPPORT

Financial resources build capacity for youth serving organizations and address engagement barriers. **Trusted adults and mentors help young people grow** to meet their full potential and gain confidence in the systems and organizations that serve them.

SPACE

Environments that are **casual, fun and safe**, and cater to different age groups with all kinds of

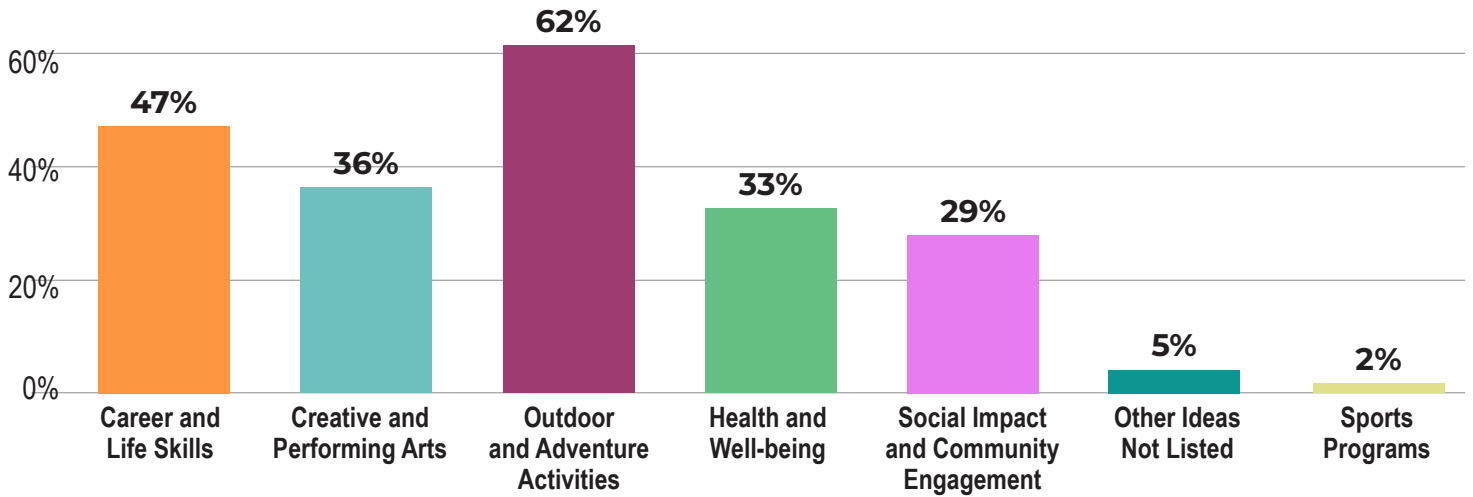
opportunities to engage them would be valuable for young people. **Snacks, activities and homework help** are also appreciated — and so are quiet spots to focus and decompress. As one student put it in a focus group: “Sometimes, you **just need to touch grass.**”

COMMITMENT

Commitment is required at all levels, from the facilitators who guide and inspire students to the educators who share the skills and knowledge to build out an idea. Commitment is also needed from the directors who secure resources and sustain infrastructure to turn concepts into reality and from donors who provide funding and thought partnership.

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DO YOUTH FIND EXCITING?

Percent of youth who selected each choice.



These are some of the specific activities that interest youth.

- Navigating **scholarships and college**
- Performing in **Broadway-style performances**
- Gaining career experiences like **construction, warehouse jobs, and airport operations**
- Opportunities connected to **animals**
- Experiences with **fashion design**
- Practicing skills required for **entrepreneurship**

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES WOULD BETTER SUPPORT YOUTH?



521
More
Career and
Life Skills
Programs



446
Better
Access to
Activities and
Resources



322
More
Mental
Health
Support



304
Stronger
Youth Voice
in Decision-
Making



262
More
Inclusive and
Supportive
Places to Be



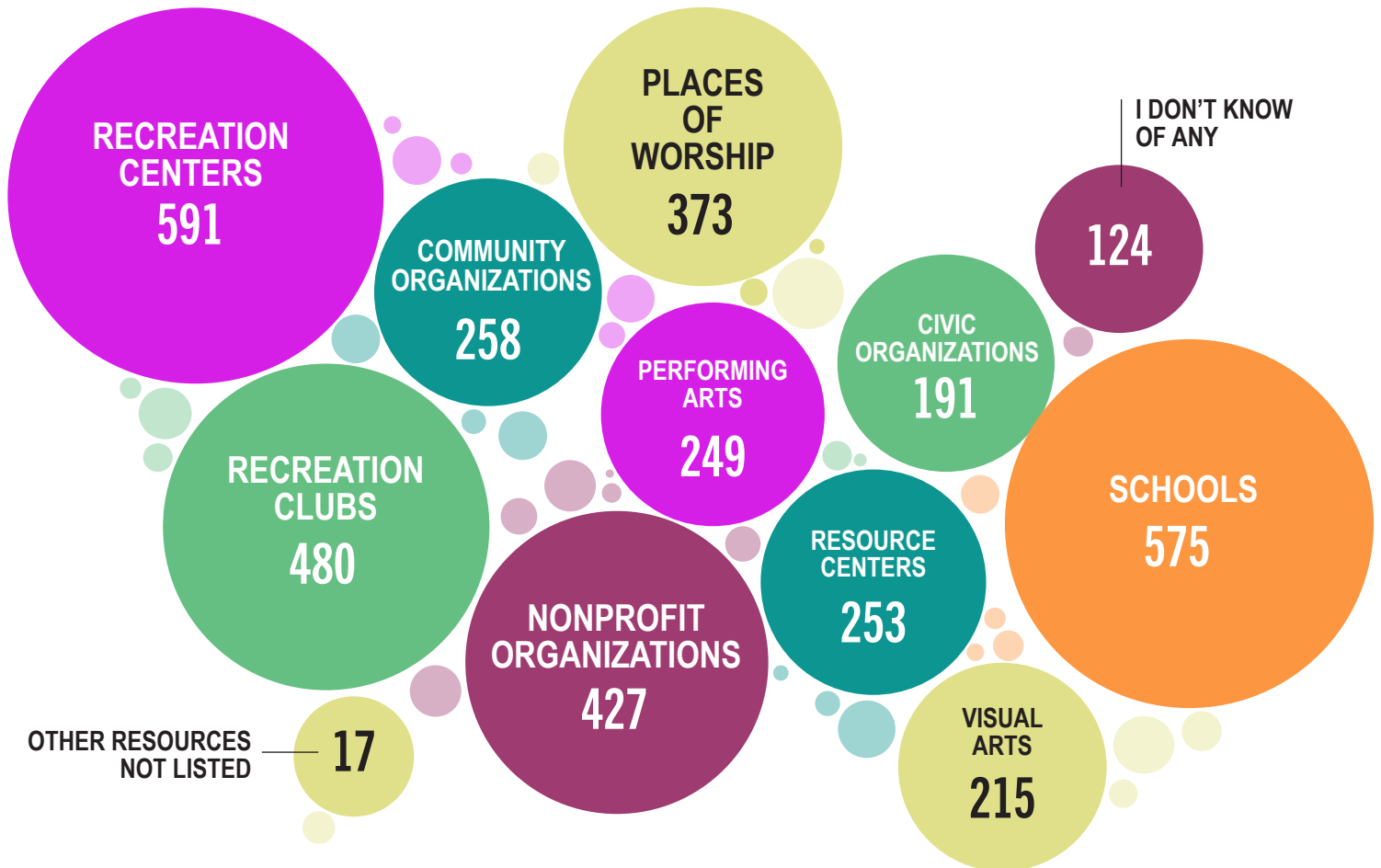
28
Opportunities
Not Listed
Here



2
Different
Sports Than
What Is
Offered

Figures represent the number of times an option was selected by youth.

WHAT RESOURCES DO YOUTH KNOW ABOUT THAT SUPPORT THEM?



Numbers represent the frequency an option was selected by youth.

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO GET YOUTH INPUT?



Surveys and
Polls with
Real Impact



Youth Advisory
Committee



Youth-Led
Events
and Forums



Representation
in Leadership

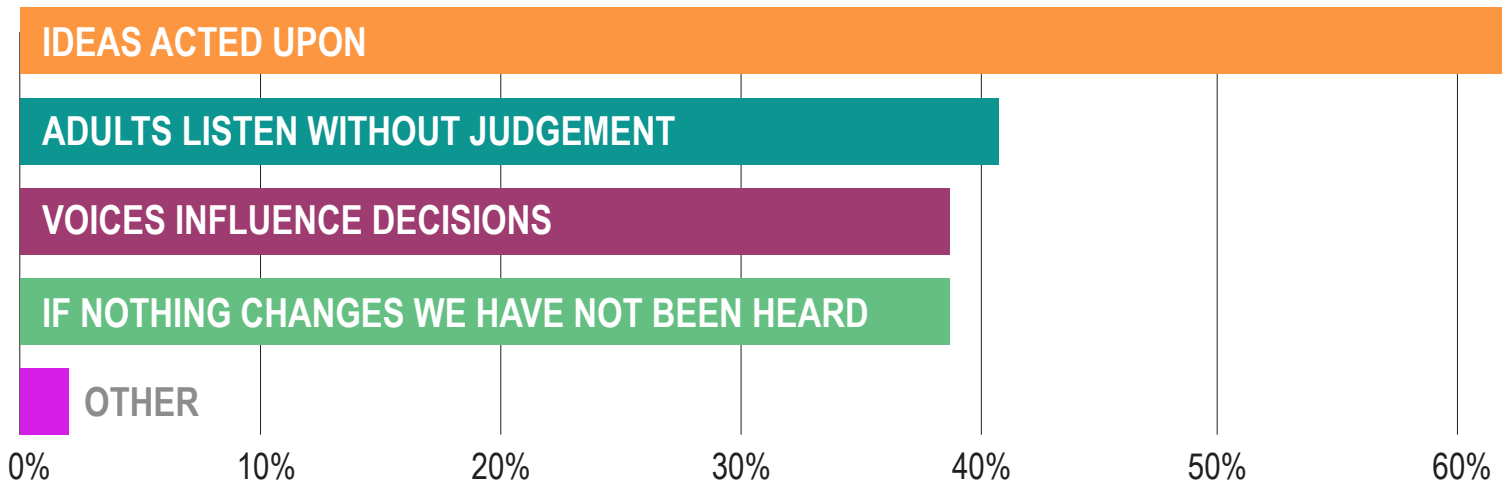


Ongoing
Conversations



Youth interns at Highwater Farm in Silt.

HOW WILL YOUTH KNOW WHEN THEIR VOICE IS HEARD?



“If you’re working with teens, you hear what’s wrong with our lives. We love to complain. If you want to know what you can help us with, just listen!”

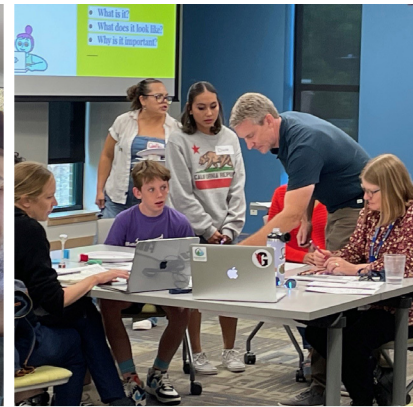
— SARA, ARTS INFLUENCER, THE ARTS CAMPUS AT WILLITS



Youth canyoneering at Colorado National Monument with Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers' Youth in Nature program.

IGNITE POTENTIAL

Young people were clear. The following ideas are ways organizations and communities can respond to what they shared.



Design spaces for youth to simply be and self-select experiences.

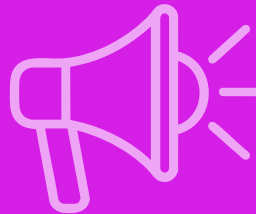
Include services like:

- Mental health counseling
- Life skills training
- Workforce development
- Academic tutoring



Consider youth experiences in program design.

- Align programs with youth schedules
- Create a sense of belonging
- Ensure safe, accessible transportation
- Make programs affordable
- Offer scholarships with easy applications



Engage youth directly.

- Survey youth to gather insight
- Explain how and why youth insight will or will not be used
- Engage youth in meaningful roles
- Use youth-friendly media platforms
- Create a universal calendar of opportunities



Design safe, youth friendly transportation.

- Expand free, on-demand shuttles
- Make bus routes more efficient and timely for rural neighborhoods

Photos left to right: Youthentity, Animal Care Career Academy; Farm Collaborative, Youth Advisory Council; Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers, Youth in Nature Program; Aspen Community Foundation, Youth Empowerment Alliance

MAKING AN IMPACT

Magic happens when young people have the opportunity to share meaningful feedback and contribute. Here's a look at impact sparked by the Youth Empowerment Alliance.

Youth from Garfield 16 Family Resource Center creating a community mural in Parachute.





Youth in Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers' Youth in Nature program.

What: Youth Leadership Development

Who: Highwater Farm

Where: Based in Silt and serves Parachute to Glenwood Springs

How: They provide paid positions for young people to work in farming operations, who learn valuable job, life and leadership skills.

What: Youth Leadership and Advocacy

Who: Aspen Family Connection's Youth Advocates for Healthy Futures

Where: Based in and serves Aspen

How: The council works collaboratively with school, nonprofit, and municipal leaders to drive strategies for substance use prevention. In 2025, they advocated for changes to the Armory Hall redevelopment project, asking City Council for the inclusion of youth-friendly and substance-free spaces.

“ They knew exactly what they wanted to do [at MayFest], and they were just waiting [for the support] to roll with it.”

—CLAUDIA FLORES CRUZ, COORDINATOR, GARFIELD 16 SCHOOL-BASED FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER

What: Career-Ready Skills and Talent Development

Who: Aspen Science Center

Where: Based in Carbondale and serves Parachute to Aspen

How: Teens asked for more exposure to STEM experience in the field. A new, paid internship was designed to offer program development and hands-on teaching experiences that enable youth to develop confidence and leadership skills in the workforce and STEM.



Garfield County School District 16 youth leaders with Peach Street Revival at MayFest in Parachute.

What: Youth-Led Program Design

Who: Roaring Fork PreCollegiate

Where: Based in Carbondale and serves Basalt to Glenwood Springs

How: They organized school-based youth advisory groups to be a voice in strategic planning and engaged alumni to understand and evaluate program impacts.

What: Entrepreneurship Opportunity

Who: Youthentity

Where: Based in Carbondale and serves Parachute to Aspen

How: To complement their financial literacy and career exploration programs, they added real-world opportunities for entrepreneurship for youth to apply marketing, budgeting, and business skills.

What: Youth-Designed Event — for Youth!

Who: Garfield County School District 16

Where: Based in Parachute and serves Parachute and Battlement Mesa

How: Youth designed and led a resource fair — MayFest 2025 — featuring a 5K race, car show, battle of the bands, nonprofit information booths, and food trucks galore.

“For a lot of us, it’s very empowering to come back to our community, be back with family, and find our space.”

— STEVEN GARCIA-MACHUCA, COORDINATOR, ALUMNI AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, ROARING FORK PRECOLLEGIATE

A Continuum of Engagement: Mentorship and ongoing opportunities for growth are **critical for youth development** — providing **long-term, lasting results** for both organizations and the young people that shape them.

What: Youth-Led Outreach and Education

Who: The Arts Campus at Willits (TACAW)

Where: Based in Basalt and serves Parachute to Aspen

How: A team of youth Arts Influencers developed programming for their peers, planning everything from a teen night with 100 attendees to a small-group conversation with a working actor. It's part of a continuum of education that starts with school programs and free tickets and progresses toward paid opportunities to gain hands-on experience.

What: Career Mentorship

Who: Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers

Where: Based in Carbondale and serves Parachute to Aspen

How: When Youth in Nature participants show interest in a topic like history or climate action, the organization weaves it into the curriculum and connects those students to partners that specialize in the field.

What: Youth-Powered Decision Making

Who: Stepping Stones

Where: Based in Carbondale and Glenwood Springs and serves Rifle to Basalt

How: Stepping Stones offers a safe, welcoming space for youth to relax and recharge. When middle schoolers wanted an arcade, they researched the cost, created a budget, wrote a grant, secured funding, and constructed an arcade from a kit.



Aspiring Youthentity chef in Carbondale.

“ It’s critical that we maintain the momentum of this youth-led initiative. We see more opportunities to pick up the speed and that will require more resources, more fuel.”

— RYAN HONEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE ARTS CAMPUS AT WILLITS



ABILITY MAY GET YOU TO
BUT IT'S CHARACTER

Big and Little
Buddies in
Basalt with the
Buddy Program.



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

There is still more to learn. As one college student pointed out in a focus group, “the try-hard kids” are often the ones who pursue opportunities to make their voices heard. They’re already involved in programs and activities. There is more to learn, especially from youth who aren’t plugged in.

“When young people share their experiences and needs, they’re offering a novel blueprint for real change. They are not just talking about what might work; they are telling you what will work,” says Jasmine Adams, who was part of the data analysis team from the Center for Expanding

Leadership and Opportunity, and who has been engaged in youth-driven systems change since age 16 (she’s now 25).

Listening to youth is an important first step. To create real impact, communities need to respond. The Jonathan D + Mark C. Lewis Foundation will continue to invest in the Parachute to Aspen region, informed by insights youth shared in this report. This commitment is an invitation for organizations, funders, and young people to listen deeply and take action to strengthen communities. What happens next is up to all of us.

““ The systems that serve young people should reflect what they actually need, not what others assume they need. That starts with listening, but it only matter if it leads to action.””

— JASMINE ADAMS, CO-FOUNDER AND YOUTH ADVOCATE IN RESIDENCE,
CENTER FOR EXPANDING LEADERSHIP AND OPPORTUNITY



Youth in Roaring Fork
Outdoor Volunteers'
Youth in Nature program.

EMPOWER highlights insights from more than 1,200 youth across the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys collected between February and May 2025. Through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, young people shared what they are experiencing, what opportunities excite them, and what barriers stand in their way. Their voices provide guidance for organizations, schools, municipalities, and funders working to provide opportunities for youth in the region. Join us as we work *with* young people to strengthen communities.

LEARN MORE: [EMPOWERCOLORADOYOUTH.ORG](https://empowercoloradoyouth.org)

CONTRIBUTORS

EMPOWER Production

Jonathan D + Mark C. Lewis Foundation

Creative Direction, Writing and Editorial

Natalie Travers, *Apogee Creative*

Writing and Reporting

Kaya Williams, *Freelance Journalist, with youth reporters*

Eleanor Carroll, *Aspen High School*

Terran Hughley, *Coal Ridge High School*

Data Analysis

Kristan Cilente Skendall and Jasmine Adams, *Center for Expanding Leadership & Opportunity*

Graphic Design and Layout

Katie Kissane and Paul Viola, *Kissane Viola Design*

Spanish Translation

Karla Gomez

Youth Empowerment Alliance Facilitator and Advisor

John Dougherty, *Human Service Innovations*

Project Oversight

Tracy Anderson, *Aspen Community Foundation*

Youth Reviewers

Pearla Alvarado, *Stepping Stones*

Alex Brands, *Aspen Family Connections*

Elijah Clark, *Highwater Farm*

Alice Cleaver, *Youthentity*

Victor Cruz, *Garfield County School District 16 Family Resource Center*

Samantha Espinoza, *Garfield County School District 16 Family Resource Center*

James Honey, *The Arts Campus at Willits*

Sara Gray Kokish, *The Arts Campus at Willits*

Edy Liddington, *Aspen Family Connections*

Maria Perea, *Highwater Farm*

Jocelin Serna-Garcia, *Highwater Farm*

Yesenia Serna-Gallegos, *Highwater Farm*

Allison Rodriguez, *Stepping Stones*

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT ALLIANCE MEMBERS ACROSS THE REGION

Number indicates the organization's physical location.

- 8 Aspen Center for Environmental Studies
- 8 Aspen Community Programs at the Aspen Institute
- 8 Aspen Family Connections
- 7 Anderson Ranch Arts Center
- 5 Aspen Science Center
- 5 Aspen Valley Land Trust
- 8 Aspen Valley Ski and Snowboard Club
- 5 8 Buddy Program
- 5 Carbondale Arts
- 7 Challenge Aspen
- 3 Cook Inclusive
- 8 Farm Collaborative
- 1 Garfield 16 School-Based Family Resource Center
- 2 Highwater Farm
- 5 Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers
- 4 5 6 Roaring Fork PreCollegiate
- 5 Roaring Fork School District Family Resource Center
- 4 5 Stepping Stones
- 6 The Arts Campus at Willits (TACAW)
- 5 VOICES
- 5 Youthentity

