

# National Youth Leadership Network

*Building power among young leaders with disabilities!*



## **An Unsolicited Proposal to the Arizona Developmental Disability Council**

1740 West Adams, Suite 201  
Phoenix, AZ 85007

## **National Youth Leadership Network**

Betsy Valnes, Executive Director

P.O. Box 5908

Bethesda, MD 20824

301-915-0353

[betsy.valnes@gmail.com](mailto:betsy.valnes@gmail.com)

[www.nyln.org](http://www.nyln.org)

**Submitted August 15, 2013**

## **SECTION ONE: Executive Summary**

The National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) is the nation's first youth-driven, youth-led organization comprised of young adult leaders with disabilities. NYLN equips young adults with disabilities (ages 14 – 28) with the advocacy skills and resource know-how they need to become actively engaged leaders in their communities, both independently and in collaboration with individual allies and professional partners. By teaching young leaders to advocate for themselves and by equipping the larger disability community with the factors for full-inclusion (people with all disabilities, people of all ages, and people of diverse backgrounds), NYLN contributes to a fully inclusive society at the local and national level where everyone can live up to their full potential. This proposal outlines a three-year program that fulfills three primary deliverables: 1) the creation of a state self-advocacy team/NYLN state partner, 2) the creation of a state community ally alliance, and 3) the creation of a sustainability model.

### **Basic Information**

Organization Name: National Youth Leadership Network, Inc.

Primary Contact: Betsy Valnes Executive Director, 301-915-0353, [betsy.valnes@gmail.com](mailto:betsy.valnes@gmail.com)

Mailing Address: PO Box 5908, Bethesda, MD 20824

Type of Organization: 501(c)(3), non-profit

Federal Tax-exempt Number: 20-3809577

Organization's Fiscal Year: January 1 – December 31

Amount Requested: \$51,000/year for three years = \$39,000/year (NYLN) + \$12,000/year (In-State Technical Assistance Partners)

Period this funding request will cover: 2013-2016

Signature of Executive Director:



---

Betsy Valnes, NYLN

## **SECTION TWO: Narrative**

### **Organizational history, mission, and vision**

The National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) is the first youth-led nonprofit organization in the United States focused on meeting the needs of disabled youth and allies (parents, teachers, community members, etc.) around the country. Founded in 1997, the organization is led by innovative young leaders with disabilities who abide by the following mission, vision, and theory of change:

Mission Statement. NYLN is dedicated to breaking isolation and building community through supporting youth with disabilities to reach their full potential.

Vision Statement. We imagine a world where all youth live truly authentic lives, where we make our own decisions, and where we define who we are. We want to set and reach our own goals. As youth with disabilities, we want to grow in real ways through relationships and opportunities. Communities must embrace interdependence, the idea that all people need each other, and recognize its importance.

Theory of Change. We are the experts of our own lives. As young people with disabilities, we believe a lot can happen when our voices are heard and when people know how we want and need to be supported.

We promote three methods of change:

- **SUPPORT INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP.** Bring youth into leadership roles and make sure they have what they need to be successful in these positions. We prioritize youth having roles of equal participation, equal responsibility, and equal decision-making power.
- **EMPHASIZE FULL INCLUSION.** Create a culture of accountability and inclusion. We want this culture for ourselves, for each other, for our communities, and for the systems that serve us. We build the capacity of our allies so that we can work alongside each other.
- **PUSH NEW THINKING.** Spark new ideas, new methods, and new forms of measuring success. Some of these topics include: media, interdependent support systems, disability, oppression, and self-determination.

NYLN has a 14-member board of directors made up of young people with disabilities from across the nation, three staff members, four contracted staff, and 15+ volunteers. They reflect the diversity of the nation's disabled youth in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, type of disability, and sexual identity with 40% of the board being non-white, 14% non-traditional sexual identity, 7% homeless, and 14% with significant cognitive disabilities (a group that is rarely represented on other boards). NYLN is dedicated to breaking isolation and building community. NYLN supports youth with disabilities and helps them attain leadership roles, live truly authentic lives, make decisions, and grow through relationships and opportunities. Further, NYLN trains communities to embrace and implement interdependence. NYLN emphasizes full accessibility—particularly relating to cognitive and intellectual disabilities—through accessible language, meeting styles, and popular education training methods. These services result in developing forward-thinking leaders who support individual leadership development, share hands-on skill with the community, and contribute to the creation and implementation of training tools and community alliances that can sustain the organization.

## **The problem NYLN works to solve**

Many organizations that serve young people with disabilities are led by adults, parents or clinical “experts” that design and deliver programming for youth recipients and/or parent groups. The youth themselves are rarely consulted in the program planning process, and consequently often feel that existing programs do not fully address the issues they perceive to be important. Mainstream programs often exclude disabled students (inadvertently, due to lack of information about the accommodations disabled student need in order to fully participate). This causes disabled youth to miss out on service learning opportunities, student clubs, etc. that facilitate leadership development and lead to positive post-high school/post-secondary outcomes. Even the Federally-mandated Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and the custom Transition activity plan that is developed by age 16 for each disabled student fails to consult the students themselves in many cases. The plan addresses employment, post-secondary education, community participation, independent living, and adult services to facilitate the transition from school to post-secondary education or employment. A NYLN-conducted study (Valnes, Powers, Squire, et. al., OHSU, 2002) showed that only 44.2% of students with an IEP were aware that the plan was being drafted for them. And of that 44.2%, only 34.9% noted that they had any first-hand contribution to the goals specified in this document. Overall, only 17 out of every 100 students were aware of and directly contributed to these transition goals that are intended to shape their transition into adult life.

Over 13% of U.S. students ages 3-21 are disabled (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Disabled young people lag behind their peers without disabilities in graduation, employment, income, and community participation (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Wagner, Cameto & Newman, 2005). Between 38 and 67% of disabled youth earn high school diplomas, with graduation rates varying by type of disability. Four out of five disabled secondary school students with transition plan to go to college, but only 30% even attended for a short time (The National Longitudinal Transition Study–2, 2004/5). Newly released Department of Labor statistics (July 2012) reveal that disabled youth ages 16-19 and 20-24 are now half as likely to be employed as compared to non-disabled youth. Only 15.8% of 16-19 year-olds and 30% of 20- to 24-year-olds are employed. Education and employment are universal keys to financial stability and independence for young people.

## **Recent solutions to the challenge noted**

The following activities represent direct-action efforts that NYLN carried out to meet the social need outline above:

1. NYLN created training tools around the areas of interest and priority specified by young people with disabilities, for example voting, community involvement, higher education, transportation, etc. These training tools are designed with the methods of popular education in mind, often excluding materials that inhibit full-participation. These trainings are facilitated by peer mentors or youth and adult alliances. As a result of these trainings, 87% of young people recognized a significant increase in their ability to make life decisions; 90% felt they had better access to community supports to enable those life decisions to be implemented successfully; and 93% felt that their self-advocacy skills recognizably increased.
2. NYLN created and piloted the *Reap What You Sow* curriculum, created as a Project of National Significance through the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD), uniting multiple disability rights stakeholders. NYLN convened and worked with four teams of 8-15 disabled youth and 5-10 adult allies. Over a year, they developed a curriculum that:

1) addresses how to set goals (in many areas of life), 2) builds interdependent community-based support systems, and 3) creates a truly fully-inclusive community by empowering youth with disabilities. In addition to the curriculum, NYLN uses a variety of training tools focusing on topics including transition, career goals, independent living, universal design, and more. The project included self-advocates, family members, and professionals.

3. Outcomes achieved by NYLN's existing programs are measured through Participatory Action Research (PAR). This methodology was recognized as an exemplary promising practice in the *School for Social Work Journal*.<sup>1</sup> This same method of analysis was used to assess the *Reap What You Sow* training, and outcomes include: a) 100% of participants gained a better understanding of how individuals with and without disabilities were interdependent of one another; b) 100% felt their leadership abilities were strengthened as a result of the curriculum; and c) 95% felt that additional trainings would be beneficial to change ways of thinking (i.e. how they thought about themselves in the area of skill and ability and how they perceived others' skills and abilities).
4. NYLN proposed the concept of *Youth Information Centers*, a project that was adopted by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD) under the US Department of Health and Human Services and funded for six consecutive years, bringing youth-focused disability information to approximately 20 partnering grantees across the country in addition to over 25,000 individuals and organizations directly, 2005-2011.
5. Within the last five years, NYLN worked with over 110,000 people including disabled youth and the adults in their lives through 690 events (conferences, symposia, group meetings, etc.) through collaborations with 314 national and local grassroots organizations in 32 states, Washington D.C., and Canada.

### **Population served and how they are involved in the NYLN's work**

NYLN directly serves up to 40,000 people across the nation annually, within their vast realms of influence. NYLN serves youth ages 14-28 with all types of disabilities, and welcomes those with multiple disabilities (often referred to as cross-disability) as well as community allies (parents, educators, community supports, etc.). By their very nature, NYLN's youth participants are a marginalized, lower economic status group. They are high school, college, or immediately post-college students who may still live at home with their parents or in dorm settings; others are seeking or serving in introductory level positions and are often within the definition of being economically challenged. They are a forward-thinking group and view social change as requiring hands-on, grass-roots community organizing/building.

### **Program activities proposed through this partnership**

By teaching young leaders to advocate for themselves and by equipping the larger disability community with the factors for full-inclusion (people with all disabilities, people of all ages, and people of diverse backgrounds), NYLN contributes to a fully inclusive society at the local and national level where everyone can live up to their full potential. This proposal outlines a three-year program that fulfills three primary deliverables: 1) the creation of a state youth self-advocacy team/NYLN state partner, 2) the creation of a state community ally alliance, and 3) the creation of a sustainability model.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kang, Mun Ju; Petr, Christopher G.; and Morningstary, Mary. (2012) *Improving the Transition-to-Adulthood Outcomes of Youths with Emotional Behavioral Disabilities*, *School for Social Work Journal*, Vol. 37. No. 1, Spring 2012.

## **SECTION THREE: Key Personnel**

### **Executive Director -- Betsy Valnes, MA**

An internationally recognized leader in the area of leadership development for people with disabilities, Valnes believes in the value of individualized and community-based empowerment. She wants people to recognize their full potential. Her main passion is international human rights. She has contributed to events in 10 countries. Many of these events focused on inclusive social justice. Valnes has served the National Council on Disability, Mobility International USA, World Bank, Rehabilitation International, and the United Nations. She advocates for the power of marginalized communities around the world. Valnes earned her Master's degree at American University in 2010.

### **Community Outreach Director – Elesia Ashkenazy, BA**

Ashkenazy, a resident of Portland, Oregon, seeks to promote widespread understanding of the needs and rights of people with disabilities. Ashkenazy has experience serving as the Community Council Chair and Research Assistant for Academic Autistic Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education (AASPIRE). She is also a Board member, as well as the Editorial Coordinator for Autism Women's Network (AWN). She serves the Community Advisory Board for the Partnering with People with Developmental Disabilities to Address Violence Project via the University of Montana Rural Institute, and has worked as the Chapter & Outreach Coordinator for Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) in her past.

### **Curriculum Development Specialist – Staci Forrest**

Staci Forrest transitioned into her staff role after two years of service with NYLN's Governing Board and Committees. While serving on the Board of Directors, Staci developed the NYLN Delaware State Chapter, known as the Delaware Youth Leadership Initiative; she also served as Anti-Violence Project Leader. In Delaware, Staci serves as the Secretary of the Family SHADE (Support and Healthcare Alliance Delaware) Advisory Board. She also served on several committees within the Delaware State transition Task Force for Emerging Adults with Disabilities and Special Healthcare Needs. In the past, she has worked with organizations focusing on educating professionals and other young people about self-advocacy and leadership. Staci is the 2013 award recipient of the Sam Miller Award from Bender Consulting Services, Inc., an award given to a young person with a disability who has shown outstanding commitment to ending violence against people with disabilities.

### **Technical & Administrative Support -- Kristen Jones, PhD**

With NYLN since 1999, Jones serves as a valuable resource and support. She has a passion working with young people with disabilities and helping to shape and mentor them into the next generation of youth leaders. Kristen has been a teaching assistant for the Texas Center for Disability Studies for the past three years, and completed her doctorate in multicultural special education at the University of Texas at Austin in 2012. Kristen also works with Disability Rights Texas, the Protection and Advocacy resource in Texas. Finally, Kristen serves as Secretary for the Texas State Independent Living Council.

### **NYLN Board Members and Contractors**

As deemed appropriate, some of the objectives may be carried out by NYLN board members or contractors. These individuals are selected for service based on their skill-set and proven areas of specialization. In order to provide a smooth-flowing program, NYLN will make these connections as deemed necessary and mutually beneficial to our organizations.

## **SECTION FOUR: State Partners/Sub-Contractors**

NYLN prioritizes collaborating with local experts as we forge ahead with our national mission of empowering young people at the grassroots level. Therefore, NYLN, Special Olympics Arizona, and Best Buddies Arizona have held preliminary meetings to find ways that our three organizations can collaborate with one another to fulfill this charge.

Special Olympics Arizona and Best Buddies Arizona will serve as collaborative state partners/state sub-contractors. The budget line item for the state subcontractor will be reserved at a flat rate, enabling them to determine how it would best be divided between their organizations, e.g., split equally, filtered through one as the fiduciary contractor, etc.

NYLN will consider the professionals listed below to serve as team collaborators and point persons until young adult leaders have been identified to fulfill the youth-specific efforts. How these young people are identified will also be determined primarily through the state teams, though NYLN will provide technical assistance in outreaching to young people (perhaps specializing in outreaching to underserved areas and communities), training those young people, bringing the teams together and facilitating communications to form one universal team/NYLN state partner, and strengthening their skills in the areas of professional development, program planning and implementation, community involvement, and other areas as deemed necessary throughout the process.

Descriptions of the State Partners/Sub-Contractors are as follows:

### **Special Olympics Arizona**

Isaac Sanft, Director of Support Programs

Special Olympics Arizona

Cell: 602-881-4963

[Isaac@SpecialOlympicsArizona.org](mailto:Isaac@SpecialOlympicsArizona.org)

### Special Olympics Mission Statement:

The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.

### Project UNIFY:

Special Olympics Project UNIFY® is an education-based project that uses sports and education programs to activate young people to develop school communities where all youth are agents of change – fostering respect, dignity and advocacy for people with intellectual disabilities. Project UNIFY would serve as the key project within the Special Olympics of Arizona to form this team.

### Special Olympics Youth Activation Committee (YAC):

A YAC is a group of student leaders with and without intellectual disabilities who work together to plan activities and serve as advocates for Project UNIFY. YAC's are formed at the state, area and school level. This group works together throughout the year to educate, motivate, and activate youth to become agents of change in their communities and advocate for the respect, inclusion, and acceptance of all people, regardless of abilities.

## **Best Buddies Arizona**

Tim Lhotka, MA, Program Supervisor

Best Buddies Arizona

Phone: 602-258-0583; Cell: 602-510-9724

[TimothyLhotka@bestbuddies.org](mailto:TimothyLhotka@bestbuddies.org)

### Best Buddies Mission Statement:

To establish a global volunteer movement that created opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

### What is Best Buddies?

Best Buddies is an international non-profit organization established in 1989 by Anthony Kennedy Shriver. In middle schools, high schools and colleges, Best Buddies operates as a student-run friendship club that creates friendships between individuals with intellectual disabilities and student volunteers.

### How does Best Buddies work?

- A person with an intellectual or developmental disability is matched into a one-to-one friendship with a student volunteer.
- Each friendship is committed for the academic year and required to make contact once a week and do two one-to-one activities a month.
- All friendships are matched based on similar interests.
- Each month there will be a club meetings and a club activity.
- If you do not have the time to commit to a one-to-one friendship than you can still join the club as an Associate Member. An Associate Member is not matched in a friendship, but attends monthly club activities and meetings.

### Benefits of having a Best Buddies in your community:

- **Socialization:** Individuals with disabilities benefit from positive peer relationships, which leads to greater self-confidence and stronger communication skills.
- **Awareness:** Students gain a heightened awareness of issues that people with disabilities face and they learn to see behind the labels that society often places on them. They are enabled to make a difference in someone else's life and their own, becoming a model for acceptance and support to the rest of the school and community.
- **Inclusion:** Both increased socialization and raised awareness supports the goals for inclusion. Individuals with disabilities are supported in their friendship and encouraged to volunteer and get out in the community.
- **Leadership Development:** Individuals with disabilities are given leadership positions within the club and the opportunity to be guest speakers at club meetings and events.

## **SECTION FIVE: Objectives to be fulfilled over three-year period**

### **Objective 1: Collaborate with the Arizona Developmental Disability Council**

- Activity 1: Hold a strategic planning meeting to assess challenges and determine goals (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 2: Establish an alliance of key stakeholders (young and adult professionals) within Arizona (Year 1)
- Activity 3: Create a plan for communication and follow-up for project implementation (Year 1)
- Activity 4: Work with the state technical assistance subcontractors (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 5: Maintain communications through project duration (Years 1, 2, and 3)

### **Objective 2: Collaborate with key stakeholders in the Arizona disability community**

- Activity 1: Introductions of team members – Arizona and NYLN (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 2: Determine roles and responsibilities of stakeholders (Year 1)
- Activity 3: Hold meetings with key stakeholders on an annual basis (Years 1, 2, and 3)

### **Objective 3: Empower self-advocates in Arizona**

- Activity 1: Lead youth empowerment workshop in Arizona (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 2: Create a youth planning council that will merge into a youth advisory council/NYLN state partner (Year 2)
- Activity 3: Lead *Reap What You Sow* training and train-the-trainer in collaboration with community partners (Years 2 and 3)
- Activity 4: Provide mentorship as needed (e.g., quarterly leadership trainings; facilitated conversation around the development of their NYLN state partnership) (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 5: Link Arizona self-advocates with other NYLN state partners (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 6: Provide technical assistance to the young leaders from both state partner organizations (e.g., making materials accessible, coordinating collaboration activities, etc.) (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 7: Other tasks as determined throughout (Years 1, 2, and 3)

### **Objective 4: Educate the community (self-advocates, families, service providers, professionals, etc.) about the inclusion of self-advocates in Arizona**

- Activity 1: Lead presentation/training/information table for community allies in cooperation with a state conference or other program (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 2: Host information sessions via teleconference or webinar about topics pertaining to community collaboration/interdependence (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 3: Lead *Reap What You Sow* training and train-the-trainer in collaboration with self-advocates (Years 2 and 3)
- Activity 4: Link Arizona community with other NYLN community allies (Years 2 and 3)
- Activity 5: Provide technical assistance as needed (e.g., making materials accessible, coordinating collaboration activities, etc.) (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 6: Other tasks as determined throughout (Years 1, 2, and 3)

### **Objective 5: Evaluate project**

- Activity 1: Establish an accessible means of quantitative evaluation (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 2: Establish an accessible means of qualitative evaluation (Years 1, 2, and 3)
- Activity 3: Report to Arizona Developmental Disability Council annually (Years 1, 2, and 3)

## **SECTION SIX: Budget**

The following budget applies to the fulfillment of annual objectives:

### **NYLN Staff Time = \$24,000**

These funds support staff time in the form of project implementation, project development, inter-organizational collaboration, implementation of goals and activities, technical assistance, and additional responsibilities as outlined above or as determined collectively.

Flat rate of \$2,000/month x 12 months = \$24,000

### **Operations and Operational Oversight = \$6,000**

These funds support web site access and maintenance, webcasts, teleconferences, and financial oversight.

Flat rate of \$500/month x 12 months = \$6,000

### **Materials = \$2,400**

These funds support creating/providing hands-on training materials for use within the youth board, community trainings, etc.

Flat rate of \$200/month = \$2,400

### **Travel = \$3,240**

These funds support flight, ground transportation, lodging, and per diem for first-hand services as outlined above.

Flights, 2/year x \$700/flight = \$1,400

Hotel, 2/year x 4 nights x \$150/night = \$1,200

Ground transportation, 2/year x 2-way x \$45/way = \$180

Per diem, 2/year x 5 days x \$46/day = \$460

### **Other = \$3,360**

These funds are reserved for the needs that arise unexpectedly, as is usually represented by an indirect rate of 10-15%. NYLN does not formally ask for indirect expenses, however, we do recognize that allowing this percentage of funding to be on reserve is an integral component to programmatic success. Examples of expenses covered by these funds may include support services, contracted service, interpreter services, having materials created in Braille, covering personal assistants, etc.

Flat rate of \$3,360 (approximately 6.7%)

### **In-State Technical Assistance, Subcontract = \$12,000**

These funds will support two in-state entities to serve as subcontractors through NYLN to provide technical assistance to the program implementation directly. This may include but not be limited to the following: providing services or resources that meet accessibility needs for the youth team, reimbursing individuals as deemed necessary/appropriate to attend meetings, helping with logistical preparation for in-state presentation, other tasks as determined collectively.

Flat rate of \$12,000

### **Total: \$51,000**

## **SECTION SEVEN: Supporters**

Here are some examples of what people are saying about NYLN and our training/empowerment materials:

- "Finally! A 21st century curriculum for 21st century youth with disabilities, their families, and allies. Put aside what you've been using, and run with this remarkable training. I watched an entire room of youth and adults engage in passionate conversations, often discussing what was hidden below the surface. The [*Reap What You Sow*] curriculum is what's NEW, relevant, empowering, instructive, and fun. Be the first on your block! Thank you for this amazing curriculum. It will change lives! It already has!"

***Janice Fialka, LMSW, ACSW, Special Projects Trainer, Michigan's Early On® Training and Technical Assistance (Part C of IDEA), parent/author/national speaker, Huntington Woods, Michigan***

- "I have been part of the disability community over 30 years and thought I was an 'expert.' I learned many astonishing 'ah-ha' moments [by working with NYLN]. I will never forget--new ways to lead and create inclusive environments I have not heard anywhere else."

***Jayne Chase, previous Director of Partners in Policy-Making, parent/grandparent/national speaker, Florence, Alabama***

- "This is one of the best self-directed training resources that focuses on building relationships and social capital to grow power for the individual. It is all about interdependence and power."

***Cathy Ficker Terrill, CEO, Council on Quality Leadership, parent/self-advocate/national speaker, Chicago, Illinois***