

# SYPB Takes over MYAN's Instagram

## A MYAN STATEWIDE SUCCESS STORY

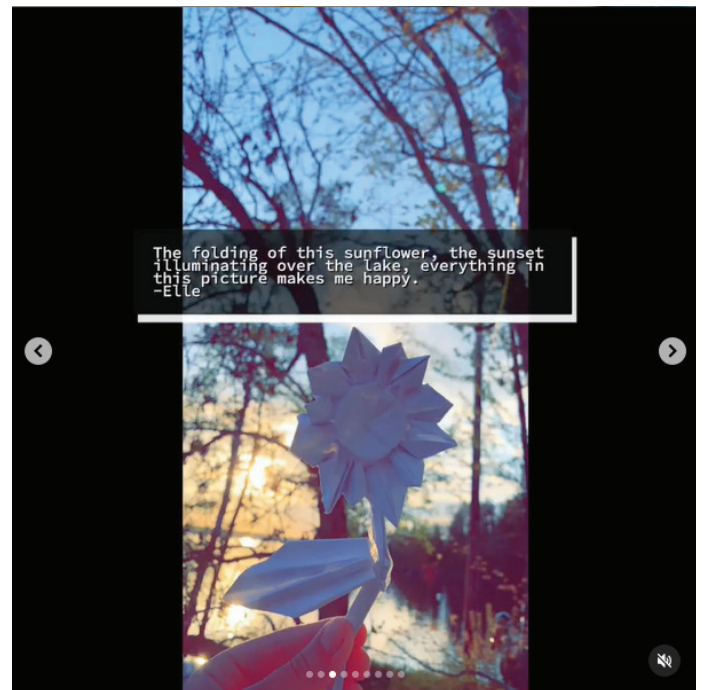
### BACKGROUND

MYAN's Statewide Youth Policy Board (SYPB) is a passionate group of young people drawn from communities across Maine. For the last two years, the SYPB conducted research into the availability and effectiveness of mental health resources in Maine schools. The group started their research by evaluating Maine's Gatekeeper training program, and then expanded into considering access to mental health supports more generally. The SYPB describes their investment in their research, saying,

"Youth mental health and wellness impacts most students lives, either directly or indirectly, and is consequently one of the biggest issues facing schools. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15-24 in Maine. And bullying in school is often tied to mental health challenges. We chose this topic because of the wide-reaching implications of mental health on schooling, as well as our own experiences navigating mental health challenges."

Early 2020 posed unprecedented challenges for young people. Much of Maine and the rest of the country closed in the early months of the pandemic in response to the spread of COVID-19. Decisions to close school

and youth programs had significant impacts on many young people and their physical/emotional health. While there's limited-to-no data on the long-term effects of school closures, young people were clearly disrupted and frustrated by them. Many young people also lost access to traditional support structures and were asked to adapt quickly to new structures, often without a



voice or participation in those decisions.<sup>1</sup> Young people experience healthier outcomes when they have strong connections to their communities, peers, and supportive adults.

The SYPB recognized that many young people were feeling isolated due to school closures and a more

pronounced lack of access to mental health services. Additionally, their own project work was stalled by physical distancing and the SYPB decided on a pivot to meet the moment. Having identified community connection as an important protective factor during their two years of research, the SYPB planned a public photovoice project to be shared on MYAN's Instagram page via an "Instagram takeover."

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION



In the weeks after statewide stay-at-home orders were issued, seven members of the SYPB met online in a series of Zoom calls with MYAN staff. They discussed the collective anxieties they were feeling and were being expressed online by other youth. Together, SYPB members decided to create a photovoice project, based in their mental health research, to express themselves and offer a source of connection for other Maine youth. Photovoice is a participatory action research methodology that empowers people to identify, represent and enhance their community and life circumstances through images. Photovoice invites participants to act as recorders and potential analysts for social action and change through the immediacy of visual images and their accompanying stories.<sup>2</sup>

SYPB members brainstormed a list of potential topics that could serve as themes for the photovoice series. They deliberated on why they thought specific themes would be most impactful and coached each other to think about how those themes were showing up in their lives. The SYPB ultimately decided on six days of consecutive Instagram posts, each aligned to a different theme.

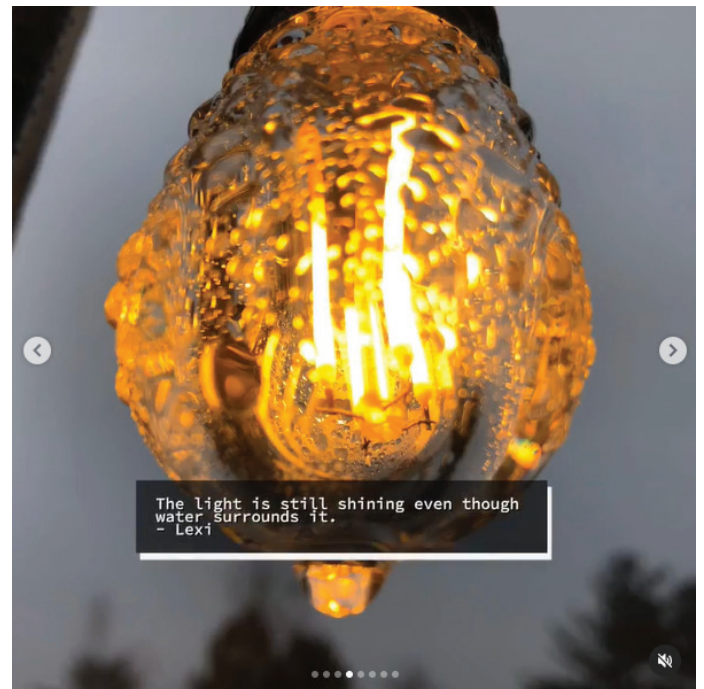
- Day 1: Connection to Others
- Day 2: Happiness
- Day 3: Hope
- Day 4: Resilience
- Day 5: Strength
- Day 6: Connection to Self

These themes were chosen by the SYPB specifically to help counter the negative messages that were prevalent online at the beginning of the pandemic. They wanted to provide a positive narrative to young people struggling with the transition to physical distancing and invite them to form new connections online and through social media. In addition, SYPB members discussed their contributions with one another, further solidifying their connections with one another.

Every post featured an opening video message from an SYPB member talking about the day's theme and purpose. Each member added a personal photo related to the theme with a caption of what the theme meant to them. MYAN staff members supporting the SYPB also participated. The final project resulted in a six-part photovoice series that put board members' experiences into conversation with one another and invited participation from MYAN's Instagram community.

## OUTCOMES

The SYPB's photo voice project was warmly received on Instagram. Each post had a reach of 300 to 400 people, and were liked a total of 264 times, an average of 38 likes per post. At their time of posting, they ranked as the most popular posts on MYAN's Instagram page. What began as a pivot project ended up reaching a huge number of people with messages of community, connection, and resilience.



While developing the project, members of the SYPB enhanced a number of key personal skills:

**Advocacy** – they gained experience articulating their ideas and advocating for what they thought would be the best option for the group. This required trust in one another and confidence in themselves. Ultimately, each group member contributed to shaping the focus of the photovoice.

**Creative Communication** – they practiced using multiple methods to express their points of view and to share their experiences and explored creative outlets as a tool for messaging with a larger shared community.

**Empathy** – the project required SYPB members to listen to one another’s emotional challenges and experiences during the pandemic; they provided emotional support and helped each other feel confident to share their insights with hundreds of strangers through the Instagram takeover.

On top of these three key skills, this project required a high level of teamwork, self-reflection and healthy risk taking to share personal insights to a wide

audience during a difficult moment worldwide. This project demonstrates that youth-driven work has the potential to resonate with community members at a greater frequency than traditional organizational communication. Since publicly sharing the project, SYPB members have taken the photovoice project back to their local youth engagement groups, rippling out into new photovoice projects starting in other areas of the state.

The SYPB photovoice project represents a successful project that both responded to COVID-19 and contributed to improved youth mental health.

<sup>1</sup> Efuribe, C., Barre-Hemingway, M., Vaghefi, E., & Suleiman, A. B. (2020). Coping With the COVID-19 Crisis: A Call for Youth Engagement and the Inclusion of Young People in Matters That Affect Their Lives. *The Journal of adolescent health* : official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine, 67(1), 16–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.04.009>

<sup>2</sup> Wang C. & Burris M. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24 (3), 369–387



# Success Story Creation Guide

*Is there a program or project you'd like to capture in more than data alone? Use this document as a starting place to tell youth engagement stories!*

## SECTION 1: PROJECT BACKGROUND

The first section of your success story should provide context for the project or program highlight. Begin by introducing readers to the group of young people whose work is being celebrated. Then, contextualize their work using relevant environmental, cultural, and youth development information.

- Introduce the group or program.
- Describe the group or program's purpose. What problem do they hope to solve?
  - What issues are they working to address?
  - Which youth assets does the group or program support?
- Frame the purpose with data, research, or stories.

## SECTION 2: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Use this section to describe the project or program initiative and its specific actions and/or processes. Readers should understand the project's scope, stakeholders, activities, and connection to the group or program's purpose (as described in section 1).

- Explain the connection between the project and the group's purpose.
  - How does this specific project support youth asset development or address the problem?
- Described stakeholders involved, including both internal and external partners.
  - How did youth participants guide/lead the project?
- Provide an overview of project activities.
  - What was done?
  - When and where?

## SECTION 3: PROJECT OUTCOMES

This section provides an overview of the project's positive outcomes at the individual, group, community, and (if applicable) environmental levels. Include both qualitative and quantitative impact measures. Support claims with data, if possible. This is the most significant portion of the Success Story, where you'll show readers the wider impacts of the project and why it's successful.

- Explain the short- and immediate-term outcomes of the project.
- Explain areas of individual growth and asset development for youth group members.
  - What skills or social-emotional competencies were highlighted by this project?
- Explain project outcomes at the group, community, and (if applicable) environmental levels.
  - How did this project positively shape the group or program experience?
  - How did this project positively impact the broader community or cultural context?