

Enhancing Youth Services in the City of Somerville

A Report Submitted to the Youth Services team

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Introduction

The City of Somerville, located northwest of Boston, is home to approximately 8,380 children and youth under the age of 18 ([ACS, 2022](#)), with another 11,700 18–24-year-olds. As such, children and youth (<18) constitute approximately 10% of the city’s population ([ACS, 2022](#)). While approximately 5,000 of these children and youth attended the Somerville Public Schools during the 2023-2024 academic year, supporting school-age children remains a priority area for city personnel. In particular, the City of Somerville recognizes the need to develop comprehensive child wellbeing and educational systems that help eliminate the link between family socioeconomic status and children’s academic, social, emotional, and health outcomes. As noted in the [SomerVision 2040 chapter on youth and education](#), rising cost-of-living expenses, increasing mental health concerns, impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the continued need for both out-of-school-time and post-secondary resources, create an important role for city government in fostering positive youth development.

The Youth Services Team is a new team within the Health and Human Services Division in the City of Somerville. The team’s purpose is to promote and foster the development of resilient, prepared, and engaged youth (ages 11-21) in the city of Somerville. The team conceives of their work as: (1) creating opportunities for youth employment, (2) promoting access to the city’s resources, and (3) elevating youth voice in relevant City matters.

As a part of its initial capacity building, the team sought to explore local stakeholders’ perspectives on *how the City of Somerville – and specifically the Youth Services Team – might support the individual and collective growth of youth in the city*. Specifically, the team sought to identify positive aspects of their current service provision, barriers to access, barriers to efficacy, and potential gaps in services. They also sought innovative ideas about programming that might address these gaps/barriers.

Methods

Aligned with these goals, the current report outlines findings from two months of qualitative data collection with youth and adult stakeholders in Somerville. Data were collected via interviews and focus groups with youth ages 11-19, and the adult professionals who support them. Data were collected from both in-school and out-of-school youth service providers, with a focus on the **out-of-school needs** of youth constituents. Given this project's short

timeframe, we were not able to speak with all the youth or service providers who we hoped to reach; however, we captured a range of youth and service providers in this analysis.

Participants

At the start of this project, the project facilitators sat down with Kristina Bergquist to identify a set of participants that would provide adequate stakeholder representation across city youth programming. During this process, we identified 17 groups of adults or youth with whom we hoped to speak, paying close attention to those groups whose voices are often marginalized or excluded from citywide analyses. Of these initial 17 groups, we spoke with youth or adult representatives from 13 groups during the allotted time frame. The groups with whom we spoke are listed below, with an indication of who participated and in what way:

<u>Program</u>	<u>Participated?</u>	<u>Age of Participants</u>	<u>Method</u>
Parks & Rec Teen Programs	Yes	Adults	Interview (2)
Library Teen Center	Yes	Adults	Interview (2)
Teen Empowerment	Yes	Youth + Adult	Focus Group (5)
SCALE	No	*no response	
First Source Jobs Initiative	No		
Youth Worker Network	Yes	Adults	Focus Group (15)
HS Counselors, SPS	Yes	Adults	Focus Group (12)
MS Counselors, SPS	Yes	Adults	Focus Group (6)
Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs Youth Leads	Yes	Adults	Focus Group (5)
Welcome Project, LIPS	Yes	Youth	Focus Group (12)
Mystic Learning Center	Yes	Youth + Adults	Focus Group (14)
GSA Advisor, SPS	No	*no response	
Clarendon Hill Youth Center	No	*no existing program	
Director of Equity &	Yes	Adult	Interview (1)

Excellence, SPS			
Newcomer Counselor, SHS	Yes	Adult	Written responses
Director of College and Career Readiness, SHS	Yes	Adult	Interview (1)
Next Wave Full Circle Administrator, SPS	Yes	Adult	Interview (1)

Data Collection Process

Regardless of whether an interview or focus group was conducted, the goal of our data collection was to understand: (1) current perceptions of youth services in the City, (2) ideas about barriers to access and efficacy in service provision, (3) gaps in service provision, and (4) innovative strategies that the Youth Services team might pursue to address the gaps in services for Somerville youth. Our protocols provided space for participants to think broadly about the Somerville youth services that they would want to see, such that they might identify their own priorities in terms of future work. Then, we asked participants to zoom in on the three areas of focus for the Youth Services team, explaining each area first: (1) creating opportunities for youth employment, (2) promoting access to the city's resources, and (3) elevating youth voice in relevant City matters.

To accomplish this goal, we used semi-structured interview and focus group protocols, which varied slightly depending on whether we were speaking with youth or adults. (See Appendix A for protocols.) During all data collection, we concurrently typed field notes to capture participants' thinking. We also collected any documents generated during the interview or focus group, for analysis.

Data Analytic Methods

In analyzing the interview and focus group data, we began by reading through the notes from each data collection event. We created a list of relevant themes that emerged from these events, adding codes to this list as we read subsequent fieldnotes. Once complete, we used this list of codes to identify themes across various focus groups. It is worth noting that many of these themes echoed topics raised in prior critical participatory action research projects, as well as the [SomerVision 2030 and 2040 reports](#). Finally, we returned to the data to pull out specific examples and ideas from each larger theme.

In the report below, we do not provide direct quotes. Doing so would have required us to tape-record interviews and focus groups, which we felt might have eroded participant trust. Instead, we summarize the themes that emerged, and provide synthetic examples of the ideas that participants raised in supporting their assertions. Many of these ideas emerged across multiple interviews/focus groups, reinforcing our confidence in their validity.

Findings

We present our findings from this landscape analysis below. Although beyond the scope of this project, we begin by sharing our participants' vision for a thriving youth system in the City of Somerville, which we generated by integrating ideas across the interviews and focus groups. We start with this vision, because we believe that it helps to paint a picture of the Somerville that stakeholders *dream of* for young people. As noted by countless educational theorists, the capacity to dream and vision is critical to the enactment of social change (see, for example, work by bell hooks, Bettina Love, Prentiss Hemphill, Shawn Ginwright, and others). Through the act of dreaming, human beings begin to imagine new possibilities--in this dreaming up a world where all Somerville youth have the resources and support networks that they need to thrive.

After providing a summary of this vision for a thriving youth system, we provide a summary of each of the themes that emerged in response to the central questions raised in the RFP: (1) current programming strengths, (2) barriers to access and efficacy in service provision, (3) gaps in service provision, and (4) recommendations for innovations within the city. Here, we also present a chart of the recommendations that fall directly within the purview of the Youth Services team, organized by area of work. Finally, we conclude with a summary of high-leverage recommendations.

Vision for a Thriving Youth System

Across the interviews and focus groups, adults and youth provided a strong vision for a city that supported adolescent thriving. *We asked participants to limit their thinking to life outside of school, therefore the vision that we provide below centers on citywide, out-of-school-time services.* Below, we categorize participants' thinking into themes or areas of focus. It's worth noting that many of these areas of focus echo what was envisioned in the [SomerVision 2040 Report](#).

1. **Safety.** Participants articulated the importance of ensuring physical and emotional safety for all youth in the city of Somerville. In particular, they noted the importance of providing safe spaces for youth to spend time, including unstructured or self-structured time. These spaces included **safe parks, streets, schools, and homes**. (Of note: several groups of stakeholders spoke about the lack of safe space for adolescents in after school and weekend hours, particularly when living arrangements are such that youth are not allowed to be home during the day.) In addition to physical safety, participants described emotional safety, including freedom from abuse, bullying, and exposure to traumatic events. Put positively, stakeholders articulated the importance of **spaces and opportunities for bounded positive risk-taking and independence**.
2. **Basic Needs.** Stakeholders articulated the importance of meeting young peoples' basic survival needs, a baseline requirement for thriving development. These basic needs included access to **nutritious and culturally relevant meals** through food assistance, community kitchens, or shared meals at youth centers and other events. (Youth noted that the food received through food banks or school programs was often either insufficient to meet hunger needs or mismatched to their family's food choices.) Basic needs also included **seasonally appropriate clothing** and clothing for professional activities such as job interviews, which stakeholders noted might be provided through community or school clothing closets. Routine **preventative medical, dental, and mental health care** was named as important, with many stakeholders talking about the importance of additional, accessible, and linguistically responsive mental health care; in particular, stakeholders imagined city services that closed the summer gap in health and mental health care. While struggles securing health insurance came up less frequently, several adults named this. Perhaps most ubiquitously, participants spoke about the need for **affordable housing and shelter options** for homeless or unstable living situations. This included the need for space for youth caring for their younger siblings, and shelter for families attending the Somerville Public Schools.

3. ***Positive Youth Development.*** In their descriptions of healthy, thriving young people, participants went beyond basic needs to a call for positive youth development support. This included **opportunities to build life skills** (e.g., financial skills, driver's education, sexual health, job skills), **self-esteem, social emotional skills, and to cultivate physical and mental well-being.** Youth themselves called for classes and resources that would support both their physical development and their emotional coping skills (e.g., health classes & mindfulness classes). Stakeholders also called for **opportunities for young people to take risks and experiment in safe, self-structured spaces.**¹ Calls for adults to support youth goal setting, scaffold working toward goals, and celebrating youth potential through adult encouragement emerged. Finally, participants called for youth to have **opportunities to work with diverse role models** and try out different types of experiences, as they self-actualize their own identities.
4. ***Community Space.*** To support this vision for youth thriving, participants named the importance of community resources, with a focus on space. Most often, we heard about the need for a **centralized youth center, with space for a gym, multiple rooms for activities, and access to mental health/social emotional support.** This vision for a well-resourced youth center as a hub for youth activity reached near consensus across all our focus groups and interviews – we heard it repeatedly, despite naming it as beyond the scope of the Youth Services team. Many participants imagined this central space as multigenerational, serving both youth and adult community members. Whether in a central youth center or elsewhere, participants also named the importance of **equal access to technology**, the Internet, and digital literacy training. Transportation emerged as a key issue in accessing community resources, and therefore several groups called for the need for **additional public transport** – particularly in the North-South direction between the Mystic Housing Development, Somerville High School, and Union Square.

¹ Here, we use the definition of “self structured” articulated by the dLab students in their 2022-2023 research project. They built on Dr. Peter Grey’s definition, which includes youth agency and youth leadership of spaces. This requires youth directed spaces that offer multiple choices for engagement, where adults guide but do not direct youth. Another way of thinking about this is that staff supervision is non-intrusive, and activities are self-directed by youth but adult facilitated or resourced.

5. ***Support Systems.*** Stakeholders, including youth, mentioned the importance of **coordinated support and care systems across the city**. Coordinated was a key word here, as many youth identified existing supports (including adults and programming) that were useful but not coordinated in their care. Stakeholders called for **trauma-informed, culturally relevant counseling and social services**, particularly for vulnerable populations such as low-income and immigrant youth. They noted the importance of **trusting relationships with caring adults** who could serve as role models and provide guidance to young people. At the same time, several stakeholders mentioned the possibility of **peer support networks and leadership opportunities**. Finally, participants noted the need for coordinated guidance and skill-building in transitional moments (e.g. elementary → high school, high school → post-secondary).

6. ***Interagency Collaboration.*** To support coordination, many adult stakeholders spoke about the need for more **streamlined, collaborative interagency and department collaboration**. This might include coordinated case management for vulnerable youth and joint programming across city units to provide more integrated experiences for youth. Some participants spoke about the utility of shared data across the city and opportunities to share best practices. At a basic level, we found that many city units did not know what other units did, creating a system where there was unnecessary repetition and reinventing of practices. Participants also called for opportunities for braided funding models and cross-system staff training/professional development.

7. ***Activities and Enrichment.*** Across the stakeholder interviews and focus groups, the need for **consistent, easily accessible** (e.g., transit accessible & with accessible hours of operation), **semi-structured or self-structured² activities and enrichment** emerged. Participants spoke about the desire for arts, music, theater, and cultural expression opportunities; recreational programming such as sports leagues and open parks, after school and summer camps that provide skill-building (academic and non-academic) and opportunities for socialization; and mentorship opportunities through formal and informal community relationships. In terms of specific visioning, participants noted the importance of **space, transit accessibility, and time of day**; they called for a consistent, transit accessible space near youth, open during the after-school hours (2:30-6pm) with dinner provided. Mentorship and internship/work opportunities for undocumented and immigrant youth were also frequently named as important.

² Here, again, we refer to the definition of self-structured put forth by the dLab research team.

8. ***Post-Secondary Preparation.*** To support the post-secondary transition, stakeholders spoke about the importance of **community-based programming to develop students “soft skills,”** including their **communication skills, collaboration/teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, financial skills, and resume/interview skills.** This might include career coaching, internships paired with structured mentoring, apprenticeships or certification pathways to well-paying careers, and college planning assistance, such as support with applications, financial aid, driver’s education, and admissions decisions. While many of these resources already exist at Somerville High School, participants named a lack of resources for youth who graduate high school *before* they are ready to consider their next steps, or, for whom there is a shift in goals post high school. In other words, once students graduate from SHS, finding support with post-secondary preparation becomes challenging. Participants also named the need for **additional support services for undocumented and immigrant youth.**
9. ***Employment and Leadership Opportunities.*** Beyond the resources necessary for social, emotional and physical thriving, stakeholders described a desire for **youth employment and leadership opportunities.** These included participation in civic life and decision-making through student government, advisory boards, planning boards, etc. Several participants named a desire to have **youth representation on every major city commission/department,** including those that don’t directly impact children and youth. Much more common was a call to have youth voice and representation in all policies and programs impacting youth. In addition to these civically-minded calls, participants desired work and internship opportunities that would support self-exploration, career exploration, and self-advocacy. Participants were particularly enthusiastic about a city that provided **employment opportunities for immigrant youth and youth who are undocumented,** two groups that are often left vulnerable to predatory employers and underpaid labor.
10. ***Diversity and Inclusion.*** Throughout their visioning, stakeholders spoke about the importance of **honoring diverse experiences, cultures, and languages, and ensuring that all youth feel a sense of belonging in the city of Somerville.** To accomplish this, they named the importance of culturally responsive, trauma-informed services, accessible in multiple languages. Stakeholders understood that ensuring diverse youth representation in citywide programming and leadership opportunities would require **targeted outreach and tailored support for vulnerable youth.** Just as adults need opportunities to learn about the diversity of young peoples’ experiences, so too do young people need **opportunities to learn from each other’s experiences.** One approach to this might be hiring youth to train adults and support each other’s learning, particularly when training must be conducted in multiple languages.

In their collective vision for a Somerville that would support youth thriving, the stakeholders with whom we spoke described inviting youth to the table in ways that were authentic and meaningful, not performative. They understood that this would require adults to step back and allow youth to set the agenda and participate actively in decision-making. As such, authentic youth participation would require adults to provide scaffolding, resources, and social capital, without manipulating or controlling youth decision-making, recognizing that youth have ideas that adults may not yet have imagined. Stakeholders also described a system insistent and thoughtful about coordinated partnership. This would require well-established communication, standing opportunities for youth workers and partners to connect across units/departments, and opportunities for youth to move across and through programming in flexible, coordinated ways. This type of system would allow for more meaningful conversations about how to draw on an abundance framework (see work by adrienne maree brown) to best nurture positive youth development for all young people in the city.

Current Programming Strengths

Across our conversations, stakeholders named several aspects of the Somerville city system that they perceived as strengths, although they often noted that even these services could be expanded to better serve vulnerable populations. The strengths named included specific programs and programming; however, we will not name specific programs in this report, because of the likelihood that this data was biased by our sample. Instead, we report the broad categories of programming and services about which participants felt positively.

1. ***Employment Programs.*** The mayor's summer jobs program represents a powerful and important resource for youth in Somerville. Many young people are interested in summer work opportunities, and the program links youth to relevant and interesting jobs. In fact, the program is so popular that many participants called for its expansion.³ Participants also celebrated the CTE and DPW work programs as providing important vocational training to some youth during the academic year, but worried that these might not be fully accessible (e.g., to youth with disabilities or youth who are undocumented) and/or too low paying for some low-income youth. The LIT program was named as an example of a middle school aged program that provided stipends for youth; participants noted that more programs of this nature would be useful.
2. ***Positive, Trusting Youth-Adult Relationships.*** Many stakeholders mentioned the prevalence of positive, trusting youth-adult relationships in the city. These occurred both at school (with school counselors and educators) and out-of-school with youth workers and other providers. Both youth and adults noted the importance of strong, consistent relationships that provided youth with mentors, as well as adult confidants. Here, participants noted the importance of adults who were available consistently, multiple days a week, in the same place. The youth workers and educators with whom we spoke were passionate advocates for young people, clearly knowledgeable about youth needs, and deeply committed to their relationships. From the police to healthcare workers to nutrition specialists to youth workers, we were consistently impressed by adults' commitment to youth. Stakeholders did note the need for culturally responsive, linguistically matched adult support.⁴

³ As will be stated later, there is a need to expand this program. We collected these data at the end of the school year, and many students were rushing to fill out the applications. In addition to offering more summer positions, stakeholders recommended offering paid workshops that accompany their jobs (see Cambridge MYSEP for details), which support them to learn about financial management, social emotional coping skills, organizational skills, and job skills. and other life skills. Stakeholders also recommended expanding the program into the academic year, when many students need support finding work that is after school hours and better suited to their mental and physical capacity.[#] Finally, the mayor's summer jobs program needs to be more accessible to hard-to-place youth, providing stipends for undocumented students and adapting program timing for those in summer school.

⁴ Questions about youth-adult relationships that emerged were largely around vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations of youth who might not have access to culturally responsive, linguistically matched adult support.

3. ***College & Career Planning Programs.*** Many of the stakeholders with whom we spoke talked about the utility of existing college and career planning programs. We heard about these programs predominantly at Somerville High School, but also at the Cambridge Health Alliance, DPW, CTE, Teen Empowerment, EnRoute, the Welcome Project, and other out-of-school programs. Additional programming for youth who are no longer enrolled in high school is needed.⁵
4. ***Existing Youth & Teen Programming.*** Many young people spoke about the programs that they currently attend positively. Although we heard about positive relationships and programming opportunities across many of the non-profit and school-based organizations (e.g., Teen Empowerment, the Welcome Project, Mystic Learning Center, dLab, etc.), one consistent piece of feedback related to the Teen Centers (2023-2024) and the Dojo space. While in existence, these spaces provided a significant number of youth with semi-structured and self-structured opportunities, access to trustworthy adults, and food. They also allowed other programs, such as LICSW's or prevention specialists from the city, to push in to youth. **Stakeholders and youth seemed to agree that programming works best when it is in a consistent place, after school (2:30pm - 6pm), and easily accessible (e.g., close to school or transit).**
5. ***City Pilot Guaranteed Income Program.*** Finally, given the timing of our interviews (late May & early June), we think it important to note that we heard about the utility of the **guaranteed income program** for youth who are undocumented. These youth mentioned that the program allowed them to plan/think forward about bills and other expenses, and their adult educator noted it was likely to help with high school completion.

Barriers to Access & Efficacy

In addition to these strengths, stakeholders also named barriers to access and efficacy across citywide youth programming and services. Here, again, rather than naming specific programs or actors, we provide an overview of the types of issues that came up across our interviews and focus groups.

⁵ Questions emerged about students who were so focused on graduating high school that they did not access college and career services fully, while there. Questions also emerged about students who had left high school or were post-high school and needed additional college and career supports. While some of these programs are being built out by the College & Career coordinator at SHS, additional support for out-of-school youth seems important.

1. ***Lack of Awareness of Youth Services.*** Across the city, there is a general lack of awareness of what opportunities, workshops, and services exist for youth. For example, in surveys youth workers reported seeing that youth often asked for services/programs that already exist. This lack of awareness seems to be rooted in communication challenges. Adults lack reliable ways to get information in front of youth, particularly after middle school. Older youth tend not to sign up for text reminders nor do they follow local social media. Thus, **youth lack a centralized place to access time-sensitive information or just-now programming.**
2. ***Lack of Trust in the System.*** Another articulated barrier was a **lack of trust in the system**, particularly on the part of youth. One interviewee shared that in Somerville it's less that students don't feel listened to—there are opportunities for adults to listen to youth—but more that they don't feel heard. In other words, youth aren't seeing their suggestions changed in time for them to believe that they can make a difference. They do not trust that the containers built by adults will have the flexibility and foresight to be youth-led or run. In part, this challenge may be due to the lack of a consistent and coordinated set of structures through which youth can influence the programs and policies that impact their lives.
3. ***Lack of Transportation.*** Transportation was presented as a barrier to participation. This was **particularly true for students traveling North to South, as in from the Mystic Housing Development or Winter Hill toward SHS, or up from Union Square to SHS.** Many stakeholders reported that youth did not feel comfortable or safe on public transportation (especially female-identified youth, and especially after dark). Some youth did not have permission to take public transport. **During the summer months, public transit becomes costly, making it difficult for low-income youth to access.** A lack of affordable, accessible transportation meant that students only accessed programs near school or home.
4. ***Lack of Centralized Safe Space.*** All stakeholders highlighted the importance of a central space (or spaces) for youth to use, both for programming and for self-structured activities. The need for this type of space was particularly evident between the hours of 2:30 and 6pm, and on weekends. **Youth in Somerville face increasingly fewer options for places to be, as the libraries and sometimes even parks are inaccessible to them during certain hours.** Across our interviews and focus groups, stakeholders were clear about the need for a youth center or consistently open space, accessible to youth in different parts of the city, with trusted adults, opportunities for leadership, arts/dance classes, culturally relevant programming, homework support, and more. Importantly this space would also serve as a place, **where youth might engage in down time, self-structured activities or just hang out.**

5. ***Lack of Culturally Relevant, Accessible Services/Programs.*** Finally, stakeholders consistently named a need for linguistically and culturally relevant services and programming. For immigrant and first-generation youth especially, language and cultural barriers prevented equitable access to information and services, particularly when parental permission was required. Youth also spoke about the need for culturally relevant foods and arts spaces. The importance of having community members and youth workers who represent one's own identity also emerged. Finally, stakeholders spoke about a lack of programming for youth with disabilities.

Gaps in Service Provision: Missing Programming

Several gaps in service provision for Somerville youth were identified across the interviews and focus groups. Many of these gaps highlight needs that the Youth Services team might help to fill, although some are beyond the scope of the team's work. Here, we first name some of the frequently mentioned gaps, and then highlight those that might be addressed by the Youth Services division.

In the summer months when programs like Teen Connection are closed, gaps emerge in accessing healthcare and mental healthcare. These were named by adult and youth stakeholders as causing stress and often gaps in healthcare provision. Stakeholders also suggested the need for additional mentorship opportunities, which included both career/jobs mentoring as well as therapeutic mentoring. Mentoring opportunities were deemed particularly important for first-generation and immigrant/newcomer youth, many of whom would prefer a mentor who spoke their dominant language. Finally, addressing digital access divides and providing family tech education were named as possible useful efforts.

Three gaps emerged frequently and seemed to require collaborative, creative thinking across stakeholders – an opportunity that the Youth Services team might facilitate. These were:

1. ***A need for programming for middle grades students.*** Many stakeholders mentioned the importance of additional, targeted programming for middle school students after school and during the summer. Often, the only programs accessible to middle school students require either fees or travel via public transportation, and many youth lack the resources and/or permission for these. Since it is difficult to offer programming at every elementary school, the need for city-provided transport seems critical. Many stakeholders also noted the importance of summer programming for middle school students, and the need to ensure that those students who can use this free programming are able to access it. Positively, youth workers shared that it is often easier to inform middle schoolers about activities and opportunities because their parents are more often still involved with listservs and planning activities.
2. ***A need for job/internship opportunities, particularly for undocumented students and students with disabilities.*** Participants also mentioned the importance of paid job opportunities coupled with mentorship and/or job training. This gap was particularly large during the school year, but also existed in the summer as the mayor's youth jobs program was capped at a particular size. Stakeholders noted that there is a particular need for employment support and training for undocumented students, immigrant students, and for students who have disabilities. These groups often have trouble finding fairly compensated work, and might benefit from "know your rights" workshops and legal support.
3. ***The importance of re-engaging disengaged or out-of-school youth.*** Across the interviews and focus groups, there appeared to be widespread agreement about the need for programming and services that support youth who have left or graduated from high school. Youth between the ages of 18 and 24 were seen as particularly vulnerable and unsupported, both in terms of job/educational opportunities and guidance, and in terms of mental health and social emotional support. These youth are often untethered to institutions, because they are no longer the responsibility of the school system, leaving them without steady touch points. Participants noted that this is a gap the Youth Services team might help fill.

Each of these three programming gaps represents a puzzle that requires collaborative, cross-generational thinking to solve. While some strategies related to each exist within the city, much more is needed to provide consistent, equitable care in these areas.

Gaps in Service Provision: Missing Structures

In addition to the programming needs above, many stakeholders named missing structures or systemic practices that would be necessary to support truly thriving youth across the city. Many of the recommendations noted relate to **coordination and collaboration** of youth services, a role the Youth Services team is likely to be able to play in the city's ecosystem.

1. ***Communication and Coordination.*** To effectively serve city youth, youth workers and service providers need to have established relationships and communication pathways. Youth workers want to be connected to each other, but need a designated space and time to build these connections.
2. ***Professional Development and Workshop Coordination.*** RTo ensure that all adults who serve city youth are properly trained, and to prevent duplicative efforts, stakeholders suggested better coordination of professional development and workshop opportunities, for both adults and youth. For adults, professional development might strengthen pedagogical approaches, the developmental appropriateness of content, cultural relevance/sensitivity, and accessibility for different types of learners, including students for whom English is a second language. For youth, workshops might include financial management, driver's education, health/sexuality education, mental health/coping skills, and more.
3. ***Access to Quality Mentoring for Youth.*** Although multiple opportunities for mentorship exist across the city, there is a lack of training and coordination which can make quality mentorship challenging for youth to find. In addition, there is a lack of mentors trained to support students who are learning English and students who have learning or social emotional disabilities. Here, mentoring refers to both job/career mentoring and therapeutic mentoring. A secondary benefit of mentorship coordination might be paid training and mentorship opportunities for older youth.

4. ***Access to Job Training and Employment for ALL Youth.*** As was the case with mentoring, there is a need for coordination of youth employment training and services. Multiple organizations within the city provide strong youth employment training, including the CTE programs at SHS, but there is a lack of coordination among these programs, and some students are routinely left out. Coordinating youth employment programs and expanding those that exist – rather than adding more of them – seems useful. This coordination could include specific, targeted thinking and support for vulnerable groups of youth, including youth who are undocumented and youth with disabilities. Youth want and need industry exposure in local settings like hospitals and businesses. Industries youth are interested in include but are not limited to: working with children/younger youth in local schools, automotive, political, culinary, and participating on district or city sub-committees (e.g. Gun safety, housing, road repair).

Recommendations

We close this report with a list of recommendations for gaps and opportunities that the Youth Services team might address. Here, we list the recommendations that emerged at least several times across the interviews and focus groups, presenting each recommendation in a way that falls within the purview of the Youth Services team work. Rather than presume to know the priorities within this list of recommendations, we present these based on what we see as “short,” “middle,” and “long-term” goals. At the end of this list of recommendations, we include a table that reorganizes the recommendations by work areas.

Long Term Recommendations

- ***Support Advocacy and Fundraising for a Citywide Youth Center.*** Although beyond the scope of the Youth Services team alone, the authors of this report heard from stakeholders across groups and ages, that their first priority was a citywide youth center. Given this, we imagine that the Youth Services team might support **advocacy around a youth center that provides safe social/recreational space, homework help, leadership programming, etc.** This youth center should include a gym and multiple rooms such that programs and LICSW/prevention specialists can push into the space. It should be open 2:30-6pm for middle and high school students, and then can provide dedicated time for older students at night. Before 2:30pm, it can be used for alternative education, job training programs, and multi-generational programming.

- ***Support Advocacy for Equitable Access to Free Transportation.*** Although beyond the scope of the Youth Services team alone, the team will need to help **address transportation barriers** in order for youth to equitably access programming and services. There is a dire need for transportation for youth that moves North to South in the city, particularly from the Mystic Avenue/Broadway side of the city to Union Square, Somerville High School, and Davis Square.
- ***Ensure Youth Providers Provide Accessible Services.*** Similar to transportation access, language and learning styles are critical issues of access for Somerville youth. The Youth Services team will need to **support citywide youth workers and service providers in addressing language barriers, as well as access issues associated with different learning styles or disability profiles.** This is likely beyond the scope of the team alone, but can be accomplished by partnering with other units in the city.

Mid-Range, High-Leverage Recommendations

- ***Facilitate Communication & Collaboration among Adults.*** Youth workers in Somerville are passionate, committed, and skilled, but they require dedicated opportunities to coordinate and collaborate their programming and service provision. **The Youth Services team should focus on supporting relationships and regular communication between youth providers to ensure coordinated, equitable opportunities.** This might be accomplished through the rejuvenation of the youth worker network and the [Children's Cabinet](#) but would require consistent participation from city and school stakeholders.
 - The Youth Services team, in collaboration with other youth serving partners in Somerville, should **establish regular meetings of youth providers.** In addition to these meetings, it is recommended that a subset of representative providers be invited to the City's [Children's Cabinet](#), which should include high level city officials able to make key decisions about funding and resource allocation, high level school department representatives, educator & counselor representatives, and youth representatives.
 - The team should facilitate these groups in **mapping the landscape and location of their programming** to identify gaps and places of overlap. As a part of this process, the team should identify highly vulnerable groups (e.g., youth who are undocumented, low-income youth, youth for whom English is a second language) and ensure that these youth are being appropriately served.

- o As part of regular meetings, one agenda item should be to share upcoming information about job opportunities, workshop offerings and events. These can then be disseminated via the youth workers and service providers.
 - o Long term, the team should ensure opportunities are balanced across the city.
- ***Centralize Communication.*** Related to the above recommendation, the Youth Services team should consider how best to **centralize information about opportunities for youth and parents to access in multiple languages**. Several ideas were mentioned, including the creation of a youth oriented 311 call center, where youth and families can get information about support and events for adolescents and children. Another idea was to access communication channels through the high school, e.g., advisory. However, SHS students reported different strategies for accessing information.
- ***Shift from Delivery to Coordination.*** Participants raised the need for **coordination of professional development opportunities, youth workshops, and the recruitment of quality volunteers** (particularly, multi-lingual volunteers). Rather than creating new workshops or reinventing content that already exists, we recommend that the Youth Services team focus on coordinating and streamlining available content for **both youth and youth-serving adults**.
 - o Once youth serving organizations have mapped the landscape and coordination of their programming, the Youth Services team can assess what additional youth-facing workshops are necessary. Based on these focus groups and interviews, content around financial management, driver's education, health/sexuality education, and mental health/coping, seem like possible missing pieces.
 - o The Youth Services team can also help coordinate transportation for youth, food/meals, and activities or supervision for younger siblings. In cases where the Youth Services team cannot provide workshops on its own (e.g., Driver's Education), the department can provide vouchers and financial aid for low-income students to attend existing (paid) opportunities.
 - o Finally, the Youth Services team should assess currently available workshops for youth providers, and then coordinate/streamline these offerings. Additional offerings in this area might focus on pedagogical and developmental training for youth service professionals. This training would be useful for adult providers embedded in institutions that currently serve youth, but who are struggling to support youth visitors or build positive relationships with youth.

(We heard about several institutions that seem to be struggling to engage youth positively, and therefore are restricting youth access.)

- ***Coordinate Access to Quality Mentoring for Youth.*** The Youth Services team can coordinate access to both job/career mentoring and therapeutic mentoring that is accessible to youth who are learning English and youth with disabilities. Job-oriented mentoring is important to help students make connections, experiment with their future selves, and scaffold their skills. It is particularly useful when paid with paid internship or work opportunities. Through therapeutic mentoring, students can access mentors who provide additional emotional support. Youth might also seek mentorship when they face a particular issue, such as negotiating a bill, landlord disputes, financial aid, driver's education, citizenship applications, personal finance (e.g., credit cards, APR, taxes), health care, and educational opportunities. In order for this type of mentoring to work, however, it needs to be centrally accessible to students and families, which requires coordination. This type of coordination could also help guarantee quality (trained) mentors for first generation students, special education students, newcomer students, and others.
- ***Coordinate Access to Job Training and Employment.*** While the Youth Services team cannot provide paid employment to youth, they can advocate for and support the expansion of job training and employment opportunities in Somerville. These should include opportunities for youth who are undocumented⁶ and for youth with disabilities, both of which will require some creative, collaborative thinking on the part of city stakeholders. They should also include paid workshops that provide youth with life skills, such as financial management, social emotional coping skills, organizational skills, driver's education skills, and job skills. As was the case with mentoring, there is a need for coordination of youth employment training and services. This coordination should include specific, targeted thinking and support for vulnerable groups of youth, including mentorship or workshops around job skills, financial management, and adolescent's legal rights.

⁶ As noted above, this would require bringing stakeholders together to imagine new ways to ensure youth who are undocumented can get work and mentorship experience, be paid for their work, and receive language-appropriate training/support. It might also involve paying students for work they are already doing that is valuable, but that is traditionally not paid. For example, youth who translate for parents, family or community, youth who excel at referring community members to services, youth working on the multilingual Facebook page, youth who could be part of a walking school bus to walk younger children to school, or high school age children who can watch younger children during parent meetings.

- ***Facilitate Youth Leadership and Advocacy Opportunities.*** The Youth Services team is well positioned to facilitate youth leadership and advocacy opportunities. **This might include encouraging other city divisions/departments to engage youth as active stakeholders, provide youth with a vote in decision-making, and listen carefully to youth perspectives.** The team should also ensure that youth-led spaces and programs are maintained. This will require giving youth an authentic and meaningful voice at the table for all decisions that directly impact their lives. In addition, it will require training adults to understand what self-structured spaces look like for youth. Providing youth with agency and a seat at the table will build trust in the system, which is critical for youth buy-in and consistent participation.

Short-Term Recommendations:

Below we list several recommendations that might be easy to implement. However, it will be important to partner with other service providers, youth workers, and school personnel in the execution of these recommendations, to ensure that they are needed and relevant for youth.

- Partner with the schools to provide academic credit for youth programming, and work toward other forms of creative access/resourcing for youth;
- Involve frontline youth workers from housing communities in outreach;
- Use vacant spaces such as fields or school buildings for programming, but provide youth workers to supervise;⁷
- Address gaps in summer service provision, including healthcare, mental health care, and school counseling;
- Experiment with youth participatory budgeting;
- Support youth leadership opportunities, including programs such as Teen Empowerment, the dLab, participatory research teams, and more.

⁷ Our sense is that Somerville High School might be a convenient place to provide after school services and tutoring, but that the high school does not have the resources to ensure youth are supervised, which creates a safety conundrum. One possible starting point would be to collaborate with high school administrators to pilot several push-in programs, to see if this might work.

Table 1. Recommendations by Focus Area

Connect Youth to Citywide Resources, including OST and Summer Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a central way for youth and families to learn about citywide resources, including youth programming and service providers • Coordinate citywide youth workers and service providers in mapping the landscape of their programming and services, as well as where and when it is located, to identify gaps and overlap. • Support the coordination of transportation for youth to programming, and vouchers for youth who need to attend paid programming (e.g., driver's education). • Coordinate and train volunteers and youth providers, to ensure that they are providing high quality, accessible, and culturally relevant programming/services. • Facilitate regular meetings of youth workers and service providers; facilitate communication among youth providers between meetings. • Support the Children's Cabinet. • Support advocacy for a citywide youth center. • Support advocacy for improved access to free public transit for all youth, including during summer months. • See above, coordinate OST and Summer programming.
Youth Voice, Leadership & Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure adults understand what authentic, meaningful engagement of youth means, including providing youth with agency and a vote in decision-making that impacts their lives. • Support adults in understanding what self-structured, youth driven spaces look and feel like; provide training to ensure adults can execute this. • Support youth in getting a vote/seat at the table in all city departments/divisions making decisions that impact their lives. Support these city departments in understanding how to best welcome youth. • Support existing programs that provide leadership opportunities for youth. • Support workshops that provide youth with information about civic engagement and knowing their rights. • Encourage city officials to hold office hours at SHS.
Create Opportunities for Youth Employment & Post-Secondary Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centralize information about where/how to find support for college and career related development. • Ensure that all work programs pay a fair and competitive salary to students. • Coordinate employment, paid internship, and internship opportunities.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pair employment and internship opportunities with mentorship and workshops that support job skills. ● Ensure that employment and internship opportunities include scaffolded, tailored support for immigrant youth, youth who are undocumented, and youth with specific learning/disability profiles. ● Coordinate counseling support around college, career and post-secondary planning <u>across school-based and community-based providers</u>. ● Provide community-based counseling support for college, career, and post-secondary planning that targets students who have graduated from or dropped out of high school.
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Conclusion

This report, written for the Youth Services team of the Health and Human Services Division in the City of Somerville, provides a preliminary landscape analysis of the prevalent needs of youth in the city. As such, it seeks to support the team in determining their next steps, as well as to support the city of Somerville in improving the efficacy of youth facing programs and services.

The recommendations provided above, gleaned from 13 conversations with youth and adults who serve youth, highlight the importance of collaboration and coordination among those who serve adolescents in the city. Positioned within the Health and Human Services Division, the Youth Services team can play a critical role in facilitating coordination, collaboration, and advocacy on behalf of city youth. Whether it be through standing meetings or other structures, the team should create democratic processes through which youth workers, youth providers, and youth themselves can collaboratively plan, organize, and evaluate youth-facing programming. The team can also work to make transparent adult decision-making within the city, including current allocations of financial and human resources. Improving transparency in decision-making will help young people know when/where to work to leverage change, and how to advocate for the allocation of resources that they believe would best serve them. The Youth Services team can also facilitate the coordination of adult advocacy efforts on behalf of resources that youth want and need.

In addition to the recommendations above, we encourage the city to continue to collect data from youth that can inform their future programming. Developing a youth advisory council

and other structures for youth feedback -- including participatory budgeting -- will help all city departments to better serve their adolescent constituents.

Appendix A: Protocols

Introduce self & Assent

Introduce yourself.

I'm helping the City of Somerville with a project to understand three things: 1) what youth currently think about youth services offered the city; 2) barriers to accessing things the city offers/things that make services the city offers not work well for youth; and 3) what youth need from the city that isn't currently offered (within the scope of the handout). I'm here today to learn more about what you think about these three things. I don't work for the city, but I am helping them with a project. When we're done today I'll share what you say with the team I'm working with. Over the summer they will write up a report and share the findings to a group of City of Somerville and other members of the community.

Before we jump into getting to learn from you, I want to make sure you're okay with participating in this conversation and me taking notes and sharing these back with the team I'm working with. We won't use your names when we share back what we've learned. What questions does anyone have before I ask if you're okay with it? Can you give me a thumbs up if you're okay with me sharing what I learn with my team and for them to share those things with the city?

Intros (if have time)

Share:

- name (just so I can know who you are, we won't share names)
- pronouns
- something you like to do in your spare time
- somewhere in the city that you like to go to do that thing or somewhere that feels like home/like you belong.

Part 1: Visioning of a youth system that meets needs and barriers to getting there

@ADULTS: let's imagine that the City of Somerville had a strong youth services division where you felt like you could effectively support the young people in your care, and do your job. What would you see/hear/experience? How would you know that the system was working well?

@YOUTH: let's imagine the City of Somerville was set up to FULLY and TRULY support young people. IN other words, you could access the resources and supports that you needed to feel successful. What would you see/hear/experience? How would you know that the system was working well?

Part 2: What the department controls

In this current project, we are mostly interested in understanding your needs and what is hard based on what we can do connected to this specific office. But if there is something that feels really important to you that you don't get to share in the first parts of today, we'll create some space at the end to make sure you can share those things. We can't guarantee we'll be able to do/change any of those things, but we want to make space for them.

Handout

Great, let's get started by taking a look at what this office does. Go over the handout briefly. Has anyone ever heard of this office before?

Let's start the things we just came up with that fit within what this office controls. Is there anything we want to add to the list that we came up with?

Let's think about the first bucket

Career Pathways and Meaningful Work Experience

- The first bucket of things this office does connects to career pathways and work experience. Think about what you need to be able to find a job, or apply for a job.
 - What helps you if you're looking for a job or applying for a job?
 - Do you feel like you have that type of support now?
 - What makes it hard to look for or apply to a job?
 - Where would you go for help first if you were looking for a job or needed help applying for a job?

Let's think about the second bucket

Workshops

- Has anyone ever been to a workshop offered by the city?
- If you could design a workshop for youth, or tell the youth services office to create a workshop, what would the workshop be about?
- Can you think of a time where you went to a workshop or talk that was really helpful to you? Can you tell us about it?

Let's think about the third bucket

Uplifting Youth Voice

- After today I'm going to pass what you have shared on to my team and the youth services office. If the youth services department heard your feedback today and you felt heard or listened to, what would that look like?
- Let's pretend that you were able to give feedback on some decisions this department was making about what kinds of services they were going to offer for the upcoming year.
 - How would you want to give that feedback?
 - Let's imagine that they don't have the resources to do what you want or need that year. What would it look like to feel like your voice was being heard, and validated?

Closing

- Imagine you could tell the city one thing that you want them to know about what you need as a youth. Think about the three buckets we've talked about. What would you tell them, and which bucket would it most closely fit into?