



# MEMO

To: Board of County Commissioners  
Through: Michelle Halstead, Director, Commissioners' Office  
From: Kendra Davis, Management Analyst, Commissioners' Office; Nico Johnson, Management Analyst, Commissioners' Office  
RE: **YOUTH INTERNSHIP PROGRAM PROPOSAL**  
Date: May 5, 2026

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In late 2025, the Board requested additional information and options for a commissioner-driven youth engagement program. This memo provides information on these types of programs, discusses how the County and other local governments engage youth today, and provides recommendations for how a commissioners' office program could be established by Fall 2026.

## Background

### Youth Engagement Programs

Youth engagement programs (YEP) are designed to bring young people (18-28) and government organizations together to provide a youth perspective on community challenges, create professional development opportunities for youth participants, and introduce the next generation of leaders to the work to be done. YEPs vary across and within models, offering different ways for youth and government organizations to engage with one another in a sustainable manner. For example:

- **Youth advisory boards/councils** are unique, youth-centric entities that work alongside governments and elected officials to find solutions to community problems. Some youth advisory boards focus on issues that directly impact youth like teen consumption, while others have a broader focus that mirrors the governing body's broad responsibilities.
- Appointing **youth to existing boards and committees** alongside adult members allows youth to gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of government and have a direct say in community-impacting decisions, not just those that affect youth.
- **Youth forums** gather diverse groups of young people on an annual or biannual basis to collaborate with governments or among themselves on issues relevant to their shared communities. The focus for youth forums can be broad or narrowly tailored and engage youth through discussions on pressing state and local issues, conducting research and

coming up with possible solutions, creating action items to enact those solutions, or any other activator that gets young people involved in government decision making.

- **Youth internships** are mutually beneficial for local governments and interns and have positive spillover effects on the broader community. Government staff and elected leaders get the benefit of a fresh perspective on existing issues, while interns gain experience and valuable insight into local government operations. Compared to other youth civic engagement models, youth internship programs can be more cost-effective but still yield positive results.

While the cornerstones of any YEP model are organizational infrastructure, staff expertise, and dedicated and continuous funding, successfully standing up and maintaining a YEP that yields positive outcomes also relies on selecting the model that best suits the capacity and function of the government organization in the short- and long-term.

### **Current Youth Engagement Programs Within Arapahoe County**

Arapahoe County currently engages youth at the department and elected office level, ranging from soliciting specific program feedback to advisory boards and paid/volunteer internships.

For example:

- **Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Future U** optimizes how they can help young adults achieve their educational and employment goals through engaging former participants.
- Arapahoe County Public Health operates a **Youth Advisory Board** where 18-22-year-old individuals are paid, part-time staff that focus on tobacco education and prevention related projects.
- The **Coroner's Office internship** program provides unpaid undergraduate or graduate students with valuable hands-on experience in their degree field. **Public Health, IT, and the DA's Office** also operate similar internship programs.
- For individuals between 14 and 19 years of age who are interested in a career in public safety, the Sheriff's Office operates an **Explorers Program** to introduce the next generation to what it means to preserve public safety.
- There are a multitude of **volunteer opportunities** throughout Arapahoe County that youth ages 18 and over are welcome to sign up for from sidewalk snow shoveling to helping with various tasks at the County Fair.

From a regional perspective, municipalities and school districts within the county and other county governments offer versions of these YEP models as well.

- The City of Aurora's **Youth Civic Engagement Academy** gathers youth interested in civic and government career paths annually to learn about and discuss concerns related to community issues.
- In partnership with DOLA, Jefferson County budgets \$46,000 for an **Innovation Fellowship program** open to anyone with a bachelor's or graduate degree with specific public sector experience and(or) interest.

- The City of Littleton’s **Next Generation Advisory Board** is a city council appointed body focused on providing perspective and input on policy concerning younger demographics.
- **The Youth Opportunities Advisory Board (YOAB)** in Boulder County impacts local policy and programs through project-based work sourced by full-time staff through interactions with city department leaders on behalf of the YOAB.
- Douglas County maintains a **Youth Commission** focused on matters affecting youth and identifying ways to increase youth participation and reporting those insights to the board of county commissioners.
- The City and County of Denver allocates \$10,000 for a 30-member **Mayor’s Youth Council** that includes adults to help youth develop leadership skills, knowledge of local government, and inform policy decisions in specific areas.
- **County School Districts** maintain various youth engagement programs focused on leadership development, community engagement, and targeted advocacy like substance use and violence prevention.

Both the County and regional partners offer opportunities for youth to engage in a number of ways, particularly if there is a specific area of interest. However, there are limited options that offer a high-level overview of County government and operations. A youth engagement program within the Commissioners’ Office can provide individuals with the opportunity to gain valuable public sector experience, learn broadly about County government operations, and help support initiatives that impact their communities. The program that is most likely to produce these outcomes and fits the current structure of the Commissioners’ Office is a post-secondary youth internship program (YIP) complimented by a structured high school engagement guide.

## Recommendations

### Youth Internship Program

The Arapahoe County Commissioners’ Office Youth Internship Program will offer students the chance to gain a broad understanding of county operations and engage through project-based work. The participant will be an undergraduate or graduate student interested in pursuing a career in the public sector. Beginning in the Fall quarter of the 2026-2027 academic year, the program will last for 10 to 12 weeks, and the intern will be expected to conduct 10-20 hours of work per week. Though resources are limited, staff recommends a salary of \$19/hr., which is within range of similar programs and also aligns with Colorado statutes regarding internship compliance ([\(C.R.S.\) §8-40-302\(7\)](#)).

The intern should expect to gain a better understanding of county government operations, engage with elected officials and county staff, and complete a time-bound project that focuses on a county objective/priority. The final outcome of the program will be a briefing memo assessing the outcome of the county objective. A high-level schedule is as follows:

- Week 1-2: Onboarding and introduction to project
- Week 3: County Government 101
- Week 4-6: Research

- Week 7-9: Analysis
- Week 10-12: Drafting & Presentation

Students will fill out an application in partnership with HR and go through the County's standard hiring process. This process will assess the following:

- Areas of interest
- Level of expertise or experience
- Academic background and level

Staff will review applications, interview applicants and select the appropriate candidate. In partnership with staff, the intern will select a project that merges their areas of interest or expertise and the County's needs.

### **Structured Engagement for High School Youth**

Most AP Civics and Government classes require students to participate in a local government meeting. To support that requirement and provide structured opportunities to learn more about county government or get more involved, staff will develop a county engagement guide that details how, when, and where youth can experience county government in action.

### **Next Steps/Timeline**

Pending the Board's approval, the pilot program will have the following timeline:

- May-August – Develop project list
- May – Begin public messaging and finalize application/process
- May-June – Application process
- June – Review applications and select intern
- September – Begin Internship & Publish Structured High School County Engagement Guide

### **Conclusion**

The Commissioners' Office Youth Internship Program will create opportunities for young people interested in a career in local government to gain professional experience through project-based work and add a youth perspective on current county initiatives. Should the Board be interested in growing the program in the future, options to expand the number of interns, program length, and participant reimbursement can be explored.

Providing a structured opportunity for high school students to engage with County government allows youth an easy way to access civic activity that is both reliable and organized.