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Adriane Alicea – MENTOR Director of Advocacy
Michael Garringer – MENTOR Director of Research and Evaluation
Wendy de los Reyes Moore – DePaul University
Amy Anderson – DePaul University
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Introduction
The Youth Advocates for Mentoring Program recently completed its pilot year with a cohort of 12 Youth Advocates selected from six states. This innovative program provided a wealth of skill-building and advocacy opportunities for the youth who participated. This evaluation report details both the impact of the program on participants and the lessons learned by MENTOR in implementing the program for this initial cohort. We hope these findings not only capture the positive growth of these youth and their feedback about the program, but will also inspire future development and support of advocacy and policy for young people and expand meaningful ways for mentors to partner with young people on advocacy initiatives.

Project Rationale and Background
All young people have a powerful potential to effect positive change in their own lives and in their communities. Advocacy and organizing are examples of how young people can shape solutions that improve communities, institutions, and other youth-serving systems. Given this practice and research-based evidence, MENTOR’s Youth Advocates for Mentoring Program sought to pilot an opportunity for 12 young people to participate in a policy and advocacy initiative. With youth voice at the forefront of the mentoring movement’s national strategy, this pilot engaged participants in training and youth-led work that supported professional and personal development and skill building. Participants honed critical skills and experiences with injustices and inequities in order to evaluate and inform policy solutions that address the issues they care about, and promote improved youth-serving systems. MENTOR believes that youth leadership is essential to advancing all policies that support the transformative power of relationship-centered interventions in systems engaging youth where they live, learn, work, and play.

Pilot Year Timeline and Implementation Basics
The Youth Advocates for Mentoring program ran from September 2019 through September of 2020. Initial recruitment of participants started several months prior to program implementation and evaluation activities continued through the end of 2020.

The work was led by MENTOR’s Director of Advocacy who coordinated all aspects of participant recruitment, the kick-off event in Washington, D.C., the monthly coaching and mentoring interactions, the development of each Youth Advocate’s policy memos, and the eventual presentation of those memos to Congressional representatives, which were delivered remotely, rather than in-person, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other MENTOR staff supported program implementation, while MENTOR’s Director of Research and Evaluation managed the evaluation of the pilot, with support from a pair of graduate students from DePaul University.

Supportive mentoring relationships were provided by a number of government relations and communications professionals as detailed below. The core activities of the program are further described in the sections of this report that follow.
Participants
Youth
123 young people applied for 12 spots in the Youth Advocates for Mentoring program. Young people were recruited through national, state, and local partners in mentoring programs, schools, and other settings. MENTOR’s Affiliates shared the application with programmatic partners and the application was widely shared with the mentoring field. In the pilot year, young people were selected from these states: Alabama, Kentucky, New York, Virginia, California, and Illinois. The Youth Advocates selected chose to write their final policy memos on the following topics:

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<tr>
<th>Policy Memo Topics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Youth Gun Violence: Addressing the Root Causes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transforming the School-to-Prison Pipeline to the School-to-Career Pipeline: Investing in Mentoring Programs that Support African-American Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Education Entrance Support for First-Generation College Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Broken Pipeline for Non-Citizen Immigrant Students Who Want to Achieve a Postsecondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Care Out of Reach for Low-Income Youth: Solutions to Ending the Divide</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing Youth Gun Violence through Increasing Youth Development Opportunities in the United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improving Air Quality in the United States through Reducing Sulfur Dioxide Emissions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strengthening Support for Children of Substance Addicted Adults: Addressing the Most Vulnerable Victims of the Opioid Epidemic</td>
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<td>Providing a Quality Education for English Language Learner Students in the United States</td>
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<td>An Unfair System: Finding Alternatives for Youth Incarceration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safe Schools: Improving the K-12 Education System for LGBTQ+ Students of Color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypermascularity and Mental Health: Stopping the Stigma for Low-Income Boys and Young Men</td>
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Advocacy Advisors
The Advocacy Advisors worked to support the Youth Advocates for Mentoring through their personal and professional journey of their time in the program. They met with them virtually once a month to have conversations and provide space to process key concepts and challenges and discuss events going on in their lives. Advocacy advisors and Youth Advocates for Mentoring were provided monthly prompts that they could decide to use if helpful to propel their discussion. Advisors were recruited through MENTOR National’s youth development partnership, as well as the Director of Advocacy’s professional relationships. The advisors included staff from the following organizations:

- YMCA of the USA
- Communities in Schools
- Learning Policy Institute
- Institute for Education Leadership
- InterAction
- Deloitte
- Youth Advocate Programs, Inc.
Evaluation Activities
The evaluation activities of the program fell into two broad categories: 1) A formative evaluation that would help MENTOR learn about the delivery of the program from multiple perspectives with the intention of making program improvements beyond the pilot year, and 2) An outcome evaluation that examined quantitative measures of participant change and growth, as well as qualitative perceptions of program implementation and impact.

The following specific evaluation activities were completed over the course of the year and results from each appear in the following chapters of this report where appropriate:

**Pre- and post-surveys of youth advocates** – MENTOR’s leadership on the project administered a survey at the beginning and end of the program cycle that asked Youth Advocates a series of questions about a number of relevant topics:

- Their general views on advocacy, policymaking, and political change.
- Their likelihood of engaging in certain advocacy actions.
- Their self-assessed advocacy skills (at the time).

These questions were all sourced from existing, validated youth surveys, with the majority coming from the Search Institute’s *Youth Civic and Character Measures Toolkit*. The post-survey also included questions about their satisfaction with and experience in the program, as well as their relationships with other program participants and staff, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their experience, and their feedback about how to improve the program for future cohorts.

**Interviews with all Youth Advocates** – Interviews were conducted with all 12 youth participants at the very beginning and end of the program. These interviews were led by graduate student interns Wendy de los Reyes Moore and Amy Anderson from DePaul University, who supported the project as part of their graduate-level fieldwork requirements. Interviews took place via the phone for approximately 30 to 45 minutes, were voice recorded, and transcribed verbatim for future analysis. Each youth advocate was assigned an ID number to protect their confidentiality (e.g. A1). Thematic analysis was used to develop codes, categories, and themes. Due to the small group of participants, all identifying information (e.g. issue topic, home state) has been removed from the direct quotes included in this report, while maintaining the essence of their description. The interviews addressed relevant topics, such as hopes and fears at the beginning of the program and reflection on successes, challenges, and the participant experience at the end of the program.

Interviews with Advocates’ Advisors (Mentors) – Interviews were also conducted with all of the individuals who served as formal Advisors, a role conceptualized as a brief mentoring relationship centered on the development of Advocates’ policy memos and their overall growth as individuals in the program. These interviews were conducted toward the end of the program, before Youth Advocates gave their final presentations to Congressional offices. These interviews were conducted via phone and analyzed similarly to the youth interviews using thematic coding.

Evaluations of all events and learning opportunities – For the in-person kick-off event in Washington, D.C. and every monthly virtual training thereafter, Youth Advocates filled out post-event surveys that gauged their satisfaction with the event and presenters, the degree to which they felt they had learned important content, and their lingering questions and suggestions for improvement. The results of the nine monthly webinars are reported here in aggregate, although it is worth noting that there was little variability on aspects like satisfaction or learning from month to month.

All online surveys were conducted in the SurveyGizmo platform and are reported here in aggregate and not for individual participants.

Impact of COVID-19 on Pilot

Much of the work and activities in the Youth Advocates for Mentoring program remained unchanged amid the COVID-19 outbreak because the bulk majority of the program was intended to be virtual. The regularly scheduled virtual meetings, check-ins, and work towards the Advocates’ policy memos continued and the advisors played an important role supporting Advocates through a difficult time. However, COVID-19 had an impact on the emotional and mental well-being of participants, advisors, and MENTOR staff. Much of our work involved supporting the challenges of home and academic life.

Additionally, the final trip to D.C. scheduled for July 2020 had to pivot to virtual due to the pandemic. This meant that the Youth Advocates for Mentoring could not attend their congressional briefing in person or convene with each other a final time. However, a virtual program was created to replicate an in-person experience and celebration.
Overall Program Results

This section summarizes the overall results of the program — the completion of key activities, the evaluations of the training events, perceptions of the relationships formed with other Advocates, Advisors, and program staff, and the overall ratings of satisfaction with the program by participants. These program components and outcomes are discussed in roughly the sequence they happened, starting with the Kick-Off event, followed by monthly virtual trainings and lots of relationship-based support, and capped off by the completion of Advocates’ policy memos and their presentations to Congressional offices. We end the chapter with participants’ summative rating of their overall experience on the project. Subsequent chapters address the impact of the program on Advocates’ perceptions of their skills, beliefs, attitudes, and future advocacy, as well as recommendations for future implementation and research.

Kick-Off Event

The Youth Advocates for Mentoring program began with a Kick-Off Event in Washington, D.C. in October 2019. Participants traveled to Washington, D.C. and attended workshops facilitated by MENTOR National staff and other civic engagement partners. The workshops were intended to provide Youth Advocates with a grounding in their work for their time in the program and introduce key concepts to advocacy and Congress. The topics for workshops included:

- Unpacking Your Purpose and Establishing the Journey for Purpose, MENTOR National
- Identifying Civic Identities and Community Issues, Generation Citizen
- History of Youth Activism and Youth Movements in the U.S., Youth Activism Project
- Understanding Congress and What You Need to Know, Youth in Government (The Y)

While in Washington, D.C., Youth Advocates built relationships with each other and explored the city.

Survey Findings

Participants in the event rated the experience very highly in the post-event survey, which was completed by ten of the 12 Advocates. Overall, 70% of the applicants rated their satisfaction with the event as “Excellent” (5 on a 5-point scale), with the remaining 30% rating is as “Quite Good” (4/5), for an average satisfaction rating of 4.6/5. Table 1 further illustrates participant ratings on a number of key aspects of the event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of the Event</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Quite Good</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding responsibilities of being an Advocate in the program</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event helped build confidence in serving as an Advocate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification of skills to improve or information needed to be an effective Advocate</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event addressed racial and other biases and inequitable structures and practices, as they relate to advocacy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Built relationships with other Advocates</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall quality of trainers and facilitation of learning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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Table 1 - Advocates’ Ratings of Kick-Off Event
There were some differences in ratings of trainers from topic to topic at the event, but once again, aggregate ratings were quite high. When combining the ratings across all four core training sessions, Advocates rated the trainers’ content knowledge and expertise at 3.98/5 and their ability to answer questions and clarify concepts at 3.88/5. It is worth noting that 75% of the “expertise” ratings were either “Excellent” or “Quite Good” with 68% of the “answering questions” ratings falling into those top categories.

Interview Findings
Youth Advocates also spoke very highly of the Kick-Off event in their post-program interviews. A total of ten of the 12 Advocates specifically mentioned the event when asked about their favorite parts of the program. Several noted that they left the event feeling inspired, especially from seeing the passion that other Youth Advocates brought to the work and the wide range of topics that they would be working on over the course of the program. Some expressed feeling nervousness before the event and, for at least one, it was their first time travelling on an airplane.

However, it was clear from the interviews that this nervousness quickly faded due to the efforts of the project staff and the interactions with the other Youth Advocates. A few expressed that the interactive group work during the event was instrumental in allowing the cohort to bond quickly and start forming relationships that will endure far beyond the program (see later in this section for further discussion of Advocates’ relationships with one another). In general, the consensus was that this event quickly established a sense of community, taught meaningful skills, and established a supportive culture and clear sources of support they could rely on throughout the year.

“I loved the trip to D.C. because it still amazes me how you get 12 strangers from all over the place. People who are from the same state and don’t even know each other. By the end of the trip, we were just like, ”We don’t want to go. Can you extend it one more day?” A lot of it was done through group work and just a lot of interactive activities and that got to know one another, how we work. I definitely feel the connection with everyone was amazing. It’s just bomb. It’s just really nice. I have no complaints. It’s amazing.”

“Honestly, my favorite part was probably when we all met. It was something about just meeting each other for the first time, it didn’t feel like we were 12 complete strangers. Like we were sharing things the first time we met each other that were things that a lot of us hadn’t told people in our lives who’ve been in our lives all of our lives. We had just met each other after being in a group chat for probably about a day or two and it just felt so homey, so wholesome. It just felt nurturing. I think that was probably my favorite part. It just felt like a new family I made.”

While most Advocates spoke glowingly about the event, there were several who noted that they left the event with a less than complete understanding of the full scope of all the activities of the program and the amount of effort that writing a quality policy memo would require. These sentiments mostly referenced “mapping out” the whole process of writing and presenting a memo to Congressional offices so that Youth Advocates had a better sense of the overall flow and key deadlines of the program cycle.
Monthly Webinars
A total of eight monthly webinars were delivered to Advocates from November to July to further enhance their learning of specific advocacy strategies and concepts and to improve the quality of their policy memos and presentations. These sessions also served as an opportunity for the whole group to check in with one another, offer each other support, and to share progress. Topics included among many: How to Use Social Media for Advocacy, Building an Advocacy and Strategy Plan, Story Telling and Communication Tools for Connecting with Members of Congress, and Mentoring Legislation and History of Mentoring Movement and Role in Advocacy.

The eight webinars were evaluated using a standard evaluation form. As illustrated in Table 2, the webinars were highly rated in a number of areas, including overall quality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Webinar Quality</th>
<th>Average Rating (5-point scale)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which you learned new information about the topic</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The content knowledge and expertise of the trainers</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of the training facilitation and learning activities of the trainers</td>
<td>4.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability of the trainers to answer your questions and clarify concepts</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which this training taught a skill or provided information that will be useful in your advocacy work</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which this training accommodated different learning styles</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which this training addressed racial and other biases and inequitable structures and practices, as they relate to advocacy</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which this training made you confident that you can apply new skills or information learned today in your advocacy work</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your overall satisfaction with the training</td>
<td>4.35</td>
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Table 2 - Aggregate Ratings of Webinar Quality

In terms of individual session ratings, the June session on preparing for Congressional briefings was the most highly rated with a 4.64 (out of 5) in overall quality, with the December session on building an advocacy and strategy plan had the lowest overall rating at 3.63.

Interview Findings
Youth Advocates often mentioned the monthly webinars as being a positive aspect of the program during their post-participation interviews. Four of the Advocates specifically mentioned the monthly trainings when asked about their favorite parts of the program, with several others noting that they had connected with many of the monthly speakers for additional help on their memos after these events. Advocates appreciated the networking opportunities that these events provided, noting that they had remained in contact with some of the presenters, received help on their policy memos from several of them, and in a few cases, viewed specific presenters as a potential support network in their future advocacy work.

“My favorite part of the program was actually getting on our different meetings monthly and being able to see my other colleagues who were doing different policy, and hearing the guest speakers, and Ms. Adriane, talk about the different topics that were helping us build our policy memo...I’ve been able to hear from people who have experience in writing policy memos and working with people in congress. Being able to hear from them on how we can be successfully writing our policy memos, really, they seemed to me...help me as well I hope the others, it helped them as well. It really showed me that we have to continue to do the research and don’t give up on it.”
Another Advocate appreciated the diversity of speakers that the program brought in for the monthly webinars:

“...the diversity of this program helped, and the diversity of the speakers really helped too because I’m constantly surrounded with white speakers, and white peers, and just white people sharing their stories, trying to relate to a diverse group. It’s like sometimes you just have to sit there, and listen, and understand that you’ve never felt this before. So, I did that during these past 10 months. I still shared every webinar, but I did a lot of listening, and oh my gosh, I have just learned so much more, and the people who are in this program, I’ve learned a lot about their lives. I just feel like my eyes are a new kind of opened, really.”

Youth Advocates also expressed gratitude that these monthly virtual trainings offered a chance to connect with the whole cohort. These sessions allowed participants to offer support to one another and to hold each other accountable for getting key steps done in writing their policy memos.

There were mild critiques of these events, as well. Two respondents felt like the time of day was not ideal for them, with some ending late in the evening depending on the time zone they were in. One noted that a more interactive presentation format may have helped them focus better in those late-night sessions. Four Advocates noted that they would have liked either longer webinars to allow for more fun and interactive conversation with the other members of the cohort, with two even suggesting a second, separate check-in each month that would help keep Advocates on track with their memo progress and allow for more relationship-oriented time.

“Although it’s hard to be like, sitting down at a computer for an hour and thirty minutes, I feel like having more time on our trainings every month, they have over 12 youth advocates, and we are all passionate and fired up to learn, and I feel like oftentimes we didn’t have enough time to have conversations because we had an hour and thirty minutes. So, having more time on our monthly webinar trainings to have discussions. That would be one change.”

Advocacy Advisors

Each Youth Advocate was paired with an Advocacy Advisor who served as a mentor and source of support on both memo development and overcoming challenges during the course of the program. These Advisors were recruited by MENTOR from several national organizations and selected based on their skills in promoting policy change in Washington, D.C. and beyond.

In the post-program survey, Advocates were asked to rate the positive impact of their mentor on their experience in the program on a scale from 1-100. The overall average rating was 85.6/100, indicating that these relationships were very helpful and meaningful for Youth Advocates, although ratings did vary significantly, with five Advocates rating the relationship 100 and two rating their relationships at 60 or lower. See Table 3 to see how Advisors compared to other factors in the program in terms of overall quality of Youth Advocate experience.
Youth Interview Findings
The post-program interviews with Advocates revealed many themes that highlight both the positive and somewhat challenging aspects of their experience with Advisors. Four Advocates specifically mentioned their Advisors as being among their favorite parts of the program, praising them for blending personal caring and emotional support with more direct support of the policy memo development process.

Themes expressed by Advocates about their Advisors included:

- Gratitude that Advisors “stuck with them” through the whole process, even when Advocates were behind or not fully engaged for periods of time.
- Offering encouragement in moments of doubt.
- Being flexible about meeting times and delays in memo writing.
- Engaging in lighter personal conversation and expressing caring about them as individuals, rather than focusing solely on the task at hand (monthly prompts offered by the MENTOR staff were specifically mentioned as something that facilitated broader personal engagement).
- Challenging Advocates to push themselves to grow as advocates and improve their skills
- Compatible personalities, suggesting a good matching process that aligned to personality and backgrounds.

“I believe I earned a lifelong mentor with her. In the beginning of the program we had to do some exercises to get to know each other more. Even though it was a short time period, it was nice to know this information about her. She definitely helped me and she definitely guided me throughout writing the policy memo and she was there when I needed, like, if I had to switch my days out, she was understanding about that. I just think that we have the same passions in life and I’m glad that I got to share it with her.”

The most prominent Advisor-related theme noted by Advocates was getting substantial help on the research and writing of their policy memos. When asked about the experience of writing their memos in general, 10 Advocates specifically mentioned the support of their Advisor. Themes for this form of support included:

- **Helping to focus (or expand) the scope of their memo to make a stronger argument** – Several Advocates noted that they came to this program with a broad sense of the issue they wanted to focus on, but that Advisors helped them narrow in on specific aspects of those issues where change was most needed or substantial impact could be made by focusing policy on root causes or specific levers of change. One Advocate praised their Advisor for helping them emphasize a solution in their memo, rather than just noting a problem that needed more attention from policymakers. This process of helping narrow and solidify the main point of the memos was the most commonly-mentioned way in which Advisors helped the development process.

- **Editing and helping with wording of memos** – Advocates also noted that their memos received several rounds of edits and revisions from Advisors, often improving the flow of the content and
making a stronger argument for their policy position. Only one Advocate mentioned this being a negative experience, feeling like the Advisor tried to put too much of the memo into their voice, not the Advocates’ own wording.

**Supporting research and finding data points to bolster arguments** – Most Advocates mentioned this form of support, which was often very welcomed since conducting research was noted as a potential challenge by the youth in their pre-program interviews. (See the next section of this report for more details on their pre-program strengths and areas for growth.) Advisors often directly helped with finding statistics and research results to strengthen the arguments made in the memos. In one instance, an Advisor helped by suggesting that the Advocate go further back in time to find older research in an attempt to highlight the long-term intractability of their issue. Another assisted the Advocate in finding statistics that countered the argument they were making in their memo so that the Advocate could more easily address that counterevidence and explain why it did not negate the change they were advocating for. Almost all of the Advocates felt like this research support was crucial to the quality of their memo. When asked about the challenges of the program, three of the Advocates specifically mentioned that finding relevant research was hard. One expressed gratitude that MENTOR staff arranged for a special session with MENTOR’s Director of Research and Evaluation to share research tips and felt like that could be a useful feature to build in earlier in future years.

**Crafting their policy memo for the current partisan political climate** – Three of the Advocates specifically noted that their Advisor was instrumental in helping them frame their memo in terms that would appeal to bipartisan policymakers. All of these references were related to finding language that would appeal to elected officials who may not have inherently supported the policy the Advocate has proposed. Advocates expressed appreciation for helping to make these more nuanced and generally appealing messages and talking points, with one noting this skill as something they will take forward with them in their future advocacy work. Another thanked their Advisor for sharing drafts of pending or soon-to-be-proposed legislation so that they could tailor their memo to policy shifts already being considered by Congress.

“[Advisor] was a great help for me. She was definitely one of the people who I spoke on earlier about when my idea was just this large cluster. She was one of the first people, if not the first person to help me edit and just pinpoint and narrow. I still have all of the notes from my very first conversation of what I needed to do in terms of changing and editing my policy memo. Like I said, she just helped me really ground my policy memo. She sent me a lot of useful information in terms of once we did ground it into something. Because I was like, ‘Okay, well, now that we did this, this wasn't the one that I was going hard for.’ So, it's like, ‘Where do I find this information?’ and she's like, ‘I got you. And she just bombards me and I'm like, ‘Great!'”

“Yeah, [Advisor] ... I really appreciate [Advisor]. She really helped me to add that perseverance piece that I was just talking about. Oh my god, I was at a
point where I'm just like, ‘I don't know what is this leading to?’ It feels like it's leading to something big, but I don't know how big. I don't know what it looks like. She was the one that really helped me ground on the policy memo. She was also one to help me direct what the recommendations would look like, and how do I specify it, so like Title I schools and information like that. She was very helpful all the time.”

“I will say being paired up with a mentor was a game changer. I don't think that this was going to be possible if I just had to research and do things on my own. My mentor is a professional and so her input was just amazing, whether it be editing or just shifting a certain thing here and there to make certain things sound more concise and clear. Overall, it's been really great both how they structured it and with my mentor.”

Although the experience with Advisors was largely positive, a few Advocates did express challenges with the relationship and somewhat negative experiences. One Advocate expressed that their Advisor mostly seemed to want to focus on the tasks related to the memo and seemed less interested in building a deeper relationship — this youth also felt like gender and age differences may have contributed to this. Another experienced challenges in meeting consistently with their Advisor, who was dealing with several personal challenges and situations that made it hard for them to connect with their Advocate frequently or consistently. It is worth noting that, even in this case, the Advocate still felt positively about the memo-related support they received, even if they wished the Advisor had been more engaged.

Advisor Interview Findings
In addition to interviewing the youth about their mentoring experiences, a separate round of interviews was conducted with the Advocacy Advisors in May and June of 2020. Interviews took place via the phone for approximately 30 minutes, were voice recorded (apart from one interview), and transcribed verbatim. Thematic coding similar to that done for Advocate interviews was applied to these transcripts, with the following themes emerging as most prominent:

- **The remote format of the relationships was an occasional challenge** – Several of the Advisors indicated that they had formed strong bonds with their Advocates at a distance, but others felt that the remote forms of contact were a barrier to forming a stronger relationship. Advocates were all over the country, with most of the Advisors in the Washington, D.C. area, which resulted in significant time zone challenges for scheduling meetings for some pairs. Advocacy Advisors also felt the platform of their meetings, which were largely conducted in monthly check-in phone calls, via email and text, and occasional Zoom or similar videoconferencing sessions, were a bit of a barrier, with less ability to read non-verbal cues or communicate naturally as one would in-person. One Advisor suggested bringing Advisors and Advocates together in D.C. at the Kick-Off Event would allow them to form more personal connections and bonds that could extend more easily into the remote communications that inherently follow. Interestingly, one of the factors that actually helped build relationships at a distance, according
to Advisors, was the COVID-19 pandemic, which in several of the relationships served as a
catalyst for deepening the personal connection through Advisors’ expressions of concern and
caring and offering of practical help on issues outside of the tasks of the program. For some
relationships, however, the pandemic was detrimental, mostly by furthering scheduling
challenges and both Advocate and Advisor lives were thrown off-course, both personally and
professionally.

- **Advisors offered substantial support on the writing process** – The main task that Advisors and
Advocates focused on was the development and refinement of their policy memos, which is to
be expected given the prominence of that output in the program. But several Advisors
expressed concerns that they were spending more time drafting and editing policy memos than
they might have expected. A few of the mentors with younger Advocates noted that their
Advocates struggled with some of the tasks and writing assignments, and wondered if this
wasn’t an indication that the developmental range of the program was too broad. Most
Advisors, however, felt good about the writing support they gave their Advocate, even if the
volume of effort was a bit unexpected.

- **Advisors felt supported by the program leadership, but had suggestions for improved
communication** – Almost all of the Advisors expressed gratitude for the guidance and support
they received from MENTOR staff in preparing for their role and throughout their time in the
program. There were, however, suggestions for improving some aspects of the experience. Advisors noted themes such as:
  o More frequent communication with MENTOR staff about the progress their Advocate
    was (or was not) making on their tasks.
  o A better understanding of what their Advocate is learning about throughout the
    program and the subsequent volume of effort and time expectations for certain tasks
    and writing projects.
  o A more available communication platform for interacting with their mentee (e.g., an
    online community platform or messaging tool).
  o More opportunities to meet Advocates in-person (particularly at the Kick-Off) or to be
    online together as a cohort.

In general, Advisors felt positively about their experiences and several spoke about relationships that
had grown to be quite meaningful on a personal level. Only one Advisor expressed the feeling that the
experience hadn’t gone well, but also noted that their own personal and professional challenges during
this time were the main factor in that conclusion.

### Support from MENTOR Staff
Among the strongest themes expressed by the Advocates in their post-program surveys and interview
was the tremendous support they received from the MENTOR staff who led the project. One Advocate
succinctly summed up the feelings of the whole cohort by noting “... I’ve never been treated so well by
an organization. And that meant a lot because it was really personalized ... I know there are a lot of
people working really hard to make us feel comfortable and valued.”
Interview Findings
While a handful of other MENTOR staff were mentioned in comments like these, these comments almost exclusively referenced MENTOR’s Director of Advocacy, who served as the project lead and managed program implementation. This individual was mentioned by name by all 12 Advocates as being one of their favorite parts of the program. It was very clear from the interviews that these young people deeply valued their relationship with this staff member and many crediting her with their perseverance in the program and for being a strong mentor figure. One even described her as becoming “like another mother.”

There were several themes mentioned by multiple Advocates that clarified exactly how this staff member supported Advocates and ensured overall program quality:

- **Expressing caring and concern about Advocates as individuals, not just as participants in a program** – Several Advocates spoke about how the Director of Advocacy expressed genuine caring, emotional support, and encouragement throughout their participation in the program. This support related to many areas that went beyond the tasks of the program: offering additional check-ins and support after the COVID-19 pandemic began, asking about personal circumstances and challenges, and even, in one extreme-but-illustrative case, helping with groceries when food insecurity impacted the Advocate’s home life. In general, Advocates felt like this person was really “in it” with them and not just leading the project in a purely professional manner.

- **Coaching the Advisors** – Several advocates noted that the project lead was instrumental in facilitating meaningful Advisor-Advocate relationships through actions such as putting careful thought into the matching process, training up the Advisors for their role, and monitoring Advisors to ensure they were fulfilling their obligations. One Advocate whose Advisor relationship was somewhat disappointing noted that this staff member essentially served as their “mentor” and stepped in during stretches when their Advisor was unresponsive, offering both emotional support and critical memo feedback.

- **Reminding participants about deadlines and next steps** – Over half of the Advocates specifically mentioned that the consistent reminders about deadlines, due dates, and progression through the steps of the program were essential to their ability to complete the full program. These reminders happened during monthly webinars and countless phone calls, emails, texts, and Zoom meetings. And while Advocates expressed gratitude that they were consistently reminded about deadlines, several also mentioned being appreciative of the grace that was extended when they were late on deadlines or feeling overwhelmed and unmotivated. In general, Advocates spoke about a culture of what might be considered supportive accountability within the program, with the Director of Advocacy being the main source and model for that ethos.

- **Responding effectively to feedback** – That culture of supportive accountability extended in both directions, as well, with a few Advocates noting that the program staff was quick to respond when they offered criticisms or feedback about some aspect of the program. There was a sense that their feedback was valued and that changes would be made quickly if some aspect of program was not going as planned. Several Advocates noted appreciating the way that the
program responded to sudden changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, both at the individual and whole-cohort level.

In general, Advocates felt that MENTOR staff, and the Director of Advocacy in particular, had done an excellent job of implementing the program and supporting their success and overall experience. One Advocate, in expressing gratitude about the efforts of the Director of Advocacy, simply stated, “she is the program.” The quotes below further illustrate the substantive and meaningful contributions that this individual made to not only the program but to the lives of participants.

“If it wasn’t for Adriane, I would not have completed this program. She was literally the one to tell me, ‘You have done everything you have to do. You’re so close. Just finish.’ There was a point where I was like, ‘Adriane, I don’t think I can continue. I’m not going to be able to complete it.’ I was just ready to call it quits. It got very overwhelming all at once. She’s like, ‘You did it already. You’re there. The finish line is right there. All you have to do, you have a couple more steps and boom, you’re done.’”

“Also, just meeting our facilitator Adriane was such a blessing. She’s a sweetheart. I appreciated her guidance this year. I honestly felt like I gained another mentor, aside from the mentor that I was assigned...She has a very similar family situation that I do and has gone through a lot of things that I’m adjusting to this year. She was just super supportive and very reflective of what I need, I felt like. I see that connection probably the greatest thing about this program.”

“But Adriane is someone who I really got close to because sometimes I wasn’t getting what I needed from my personal mentor, so I would turn to her. I think the bond that some people had with their personal mentors, I ended up having with her. And she’s just a really generous, compassionate person, great listener for everybody. So, that also made me happy because I knew that she was making everybody else happy and comfortable in this program.”

“Adriane was like another mother. Even though I’ve only known her for ten months, it felt like forever ... And when it seems like everything was crashing down on me, it seemed like Adriane would text me at the right moment and just ask how am I doing. Aside from the policy memo and the program, like, ‘How are you doing personally?’ And it seemed like she would do that all the time at the right moment. And I really appreciate her and everything that she’s done. I feel like that someone that’s a friend that I have for the rest of my years on earth.”

Relationships with Other Advocates
One of the strongest themes to emerge from the post-program interviews with Advocates was the happiness and support that they had found in their relationships with each other. When asked about their favorite aspects of the program, seven Advocates specifically mentioned the sense of community
with other Advocates. All 12 of the Advocates mentioned feeling positive about these relationships in some way during their final interviews. In the post-program survey, Advocates rated the positivity of their relationships with each other at 96.92/100. These relationships clearly had tremendous meaning and value for these young people, many of whom described their cohort as being “like a little family.” Another simply noted, “Even though we only met one time in person, we love each other a lot.”

Two notable themes emerged from the post-program interviews that highlight exactly what made these relationships special for Advocates:

- **Providing emotional support throughout the process** – Several Advocates spoke about the encouragement they received from their fellow cohort members throughout the program, especially in the face of COVID-19-related challenges and other personal setbacks. Advocates described the group as a “healthy environment” with “positive energy” that offered mutual support and encouragement. One noted that this was somewhat surprising given the diversity of the group in terms of ages and backgrounds. This positive culture and group support continued right up through the presentations to Congressional offices, with several Advocates noting how helpful it was to go through that experience with other youth, which seemed to normalize the experience and allowed for peer support when presenting their memos to a very adult-oriented system. Several advocates agreed that meeting each other in person at the beginning of the program helped those bonds form quickly, while monthly webinar meetings and a youth-initiated Instagram group chat allowed for ongoing support and community-building.

- **Support on policy memo development** – Several Advocates mentioned receiving feedback and other direct support on the writing of their policy memos from the cohort. Advocates would often exchange ideas about how to approach the issue area, suggest specific talking points, or in some cases provide research or data that could help a fellow Advocate’s argument. A few mentioned receiving editing and feedback on drafts of their memos from their peers.

  “We would provide each other with different ideas on each other’s policy memos. We got together, one time, in small groups and we kind of bounced ideas off of each other, so I’d explain my policy memo to two or three of my other fellow advocates, and then they would give me feedback on it and they would tell me, yeah, that’s good, or no, he might want to change that or think about considering something else to add there and then vice versa, so they would tell me their policy memo and I would help them. So, it was good relationship because we were able to see each other’s policy memos, figure it out and really understand where each other was coming from.”

Perhaps the most compelling evidence that these relationships were valued and meaningful is that the group is planning to do an in-person meet-up somewhere in the United States once the pandemic has dissipated to a point where that is feasible. Several Advocates specifically mentioned their excitement at the prospect of getting everyone back together again, with others expressing confidence that these relationships will last far beyond the program.

“[My favorite part was] ... I would say just the experiences that I had with the people. That includes my time in D.C. where we actually got to meet in
person. My experience was amazing. I probably wouldn’t ever forget it for the rest of my life just because it was just that great.”

“… And it’s so weird to me how they picked everyone and how we all fit. You know, you just go into a room of people that you don’t know, and it’s just like it’s going to be like an awkward silence. In the first 10 minutes, we’re all laughing, telling each other about one another. It was just like, ‘Wow.’ We don’t experience this too often, where you meet a group of people that you don’t know anything about and then, boom, in the first 10 minutes you feel like you’ve known them forever.”

“… Overall, as a cohort, I feel like I’ve gained a family.”

Completion of Issue Briefs and Presentations
While the relationships with each other and with MENTOR staff brought incredible value and support to the program experience, the end result of all that care and support was the creation of strong policy memos and their presentation to Congressional offices. Without the completion of this step, Advocates would have left the program with their goals unfulfilled.

Advocates were quite successful in the completion of both of these tasks. All 12 Advocates completed their policy memos, which are now posted on the MENTOR website for further dissemination and use by Advocates, the mentoring field, policymakers, and other stakeholders. It is worth noting that three Advocates expressed gratitude that MENTOR had created a permanent home for their memos on its website, noting that they felt this would help extend the value of their memo beyond the program and, in one comment, made up for a disappointing experience actually presenting the memo to Congressional staffers.

The presentations to Congressional staffers were also completed as expected, with a total of 18 presentations being made to Congressional offices from the Advocates’ home states.

Policy Memo Interview Findings
There were several themes related to memo development and completion that emerged from the post-program interviews, with none being more prominent that the simple fact that this task was challenging for Advocates. Seven Advocates specifically mentioned that writing their memo was very difficult for them, with several others also noting challenges or rough moments in the process. A few notable sub-topics further highlight these struggles:

- **Time management for the writing process** – Several Advocates felt like they struggled to find time to research and write their memo given all the other responsibilities and challenges in their day-to-day lives. This was especially noted by Advocates who were currently in school. Four Advocates thought that encouraging Advocates to start the writing process earlier would help, with a few others noting that they had procrastinated some on starting their writing. One noted that starting and finishing the memo earlier in the program cycle would leave more time for presentation preparation and practice. Another felt that small group work might help some Advocates make more progress and alleviate procrastination.
• **Lack of understanding about the components of a memo** – A few Advocates noted that they started the process of developing their memo with a less-than-clear understanding about the tone, structure, and narrative voice that a document like this should possess. Several agreed that spending more time clarifying the content of policy memos at the Kick-Off Event and early in the program cycle would be helpful. It is worth noting that the format of the memos was still being formulated at the time of the Kick-Off Event, something that will now be in place from the beginning for future cohorts.

• **Uncertainty about how to frame their policy recommendations** – Several Advocates stated that figuring out how to put their passion for an issue and their ideas for policy change into a memo was challenging. Many noted that finding the right focus and scope for their topic was difficult (although, as noted above, Advisors were a major support in addressing that). A few noted that they weren’t sure how to put their passion into the “language of politics.” One was unsure how to present their ideas in a neutral tone so that elected officials with varied viewpoints would still find their memo valuable. (Concerns about the influence of partisanship are discussed further in the section below on their presentations.) One Advocate simply noted that it was challenging to put 10 months’ worth of passion, hard work, and detailed research into one fairly brief document.

• **Lack of confidence** – A few Advocates noted that they felt unsure of their own voice or writing ability, although they noted that support from their peers, Advisors, and MENTOR staff mitigated these moments of doubt effectively. As discussed below and in the following sections, growth in confidence was a major outcome of this program.

It is worth noting that Advocates largely overcame these challenges. They cited the guidance from MENTOR staff as being helpful, particularly breaking the work into smaller chunks with key deadlines along the way. Three Advocates expressed pride in the overall quality of their memo upon completion, but almost every Advocate mentioned some satisfaction or pride in completing the process.

“It’s super proud of my policy memo. I think it’s really thorough, I feel like it’s really factually-driven and has a lot of weight behind it that it can stand on its own and it means something. I wanted to put something out that was quality … ”

“Honestly, it was all new to me. Like I never did anything like this. So, just working on my policy memo and knowing that I was doing it for a good cause and a good reason and then knowing that I had people to back me up, it really made me feel good. And then being able to talk to the senators in my area and state officials really gave me the confidence to really push more with it when it came to my policy memo.”

Congressional Briefing Interview Findings
The capstone activity of presenting their policy memos to Congressional offices was a mix of positive and negative experiences for Advocates. The one overarching theme expressed by Advocates was,
understandably, nervousness. During their post-program interviews, eleven of the 12 Advocates mentioned feeling extremely nervous prior to their meetings with Congressional offices. Several mentioned, however, that conversations with other Advocates and MENTOR staff helped with their nervousness, as did the act of simply delivering their presentation. Multiple Advocates noted that once they began their presentation, they realized that Congressional staffers “were just people” like them, helping them to relax and focus on the issue they were passionate about. In a few cases, light conversation with staffers before their presentations began helped break the ice and revealed some common interests or backgrounds that put the Advocate at ease.

A total of seven Advocates felt like they were effective in making their points and explaining the change they were hoping to see result from their policy memo. Six of these Advocates described the experience as being primarily positive and rewarding. Staffers asking relevant follow-up questions, sharing relevant potential legislation their office might propose, and taking detailed notes during the presentations all contributed to Advocates feeling listened to and like their policy memo was well received. Several Advocates noted that they had engaged in follow-up conversations with Congressional offices and counted those staffers as potential supports in their future advocacy work. One Advocate noted that their positive experience with their Congressional offices has inspired them to share their memo at the state and municipal level too, and they are in the process of reaching out to those offices to do similar presentations.

“\[One senator’s\] office, their staffers were really receptive when I asked questions, brought up similar bills or action items that the senator supported ... Just the fact that you can tell that they were taking notes. They were asking for more clarification on things. Just wanted to know more overall
about the program. I enjoyed because I felt like they were taking me seriously as opposed to the other office which is kind of silent.”

Unfortunately, not all of the experiences of Advocates in these meetings were positive. Five Advocates specifically feeling like they engaged in meetings in which Congressional staffers seemed uninterested, were not listening to them, or engaged in rude behavior. This lack of enthusiasm was marked by several specific actions by staffers:

- Not taking notes during the presentation (something that Advocates had expected them to do).
- Not asking follow-up questions or asking questions that indicated they had not paid attention to what was being presented.
- Looking at their phone (for extended periods of time) or engaging in side conversations during the presentation.
- Staffers making dismissive comments about their own time crunch, making the Advocates feel like they were not important.
- Engaging in a manner that felt performative or “going through the motions” to the Advocate.
- Not committing to any actions or follow-up steps at the end of the meeting.

Advocates indicated that Zoom meetings seemed to go better than phone calls for these meetings, although those were sometimes a negative by showing visual cues of disengagement by the staffers. Most of the Advocates who had negative experiences noted that doing these in-person might have helped because it would be harder for staffers to be distracted or dismissive in person. A few also expressed that they wished the memo had been fully ready by staffers ahead of time so that they could focus more on details rather than the basic idea during the meeting — although one also noted that this might cause offices to cancel meetings if they knew the issue was not something their office would want to help with. It is worth noting that memos were send to congressional offices a week prior to the meetings, but it seems as though several offices had ignored them.

“Yeah, it was just awkward. And I wonder if we were in-person it would be totally different. I try not to think about it too much because it’s so much, ‘Well, if this, if that, if things were different.’ I’m sure it would be a little bit different because you can’t just stare at somebody in the face, to have put like 10 months of work into something and then be like, ‘Well, thanks so much. Have a good day.’ Maybe you can. If you can, then wow. [Laughs] I couldn’t do that ... ”

“When actually presenting, some of the staff members I didn't feel were responsive. It was very different. When all of us shared our experiences, some of my colleagues, they had amazing meetings that even exceeded the allotted 30 minutes and went onto 45 minutes, etc., and asking questions. Personally, I did not have that. The first office, they heard my presentation and were just like, Thanks. Okay, thanks. I don’t have any more questions for you. I’m like, ‘You don’t have anything to ask me?’ Internally, I was upset. I put my entire energy, sweat, blood, and tears for over eight months and
Several Advocates expressed gratitude for factors that helped mitigate their negative experiences. One was an immediate debrief scheduled by MENTOR staff that took place before the planned celebration at the end of the day. Advocates noted that this gave them a “space to vent” about negative interactions, but also made them feel more positive about the program overall upon hearing that many of their peers were having very positive experiences. Advocates also mentioned getting lots of positive support from their peers, both throughout the day (via texts/calls) and in the debrief session. This is another example where the collective sense of community of the cohort played a big role in shaping their experience: Those who had disappointing presentations found support from others and the whole group wound up feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment based on the positive experiences of others, turning what was a decidedly “mixed” day into something they could all take pride in.

“... What happened is Adriane, the director, what she did is—this wasn’t initially in the schedule but she added it in and I’m really happy that she did — was before the reception she sent out a Zoom link for all of us just to have a space and just to vent or whatever it may be ... Honestly, if she wouldn’t had sent out that last minute meeting we’re going to meet up, I don’t think it would have gone well for any of us. I think that what she did really hit the nail on the head. We all needed that. We’re okay. ‘Even if it didn’t go great, it’s going to be okay. Your work is still there. Your policy memo is still strong. At this point, it’s not you, it’s just the recipient. There’s no controlling that.’”

Overall Satisfaction with the Program and Ratings of Major Outcomes

As noted throughout this section, Advocates’ experience in the program was largely very positive. In spite of a number of challenges, they all were able to complete their memos, make their presentations, and grow their skills. The sections of this report that follow will go into greater detail about some of the specific areas of growth and changes in attitudes and beliefs about themselves and advocacy that the program produced. Here, we quickly summarize the main outcomes of the experience, as reported by Advocates, as well as the aspects of the program they liked the best, the challenges they faced, and their feedback about the program.

As shown in Table 3, Advocates expressed high overall satisfaction with their experience, their relationships, and with their growth as leaders — often in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic.
### Table 3 - Overall Post-Program Ratings by Advocates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Ratings</th>
<th>Average Rating (100-point scale)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much you think this program improved your skills as an advocate the issue you addressed</td>
<td>97.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How comfortable you feel explaining your ideas to elected officials and their staff</td>
<td>89.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships you developed with other Youth Advocates positively impacted your participation in the program</td>
<td>96.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships you developed with your Advocacy Advisor positively impacted your participation in the program</td>
<td>85.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much of a negative impact COVID-19 had on your experience in the program</td>
<td>59.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction with having participated in the Youth Advocates program</td>
<td>96.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these results are only based on post-program perceptions, the following sections of this report do address pre-post findings around personal growth, advocacy skills, and attitudes and beliefs.

**Advocates’ Favorite Aspects of the Program**

During their post-program interviews, Advocates were asked about their favorite aspects of the program and while many of their responses have already been discussed in this section, it is instructive to review them in aggregate.

The most commonly cited favorite component of the program, was the **Kick-Off Event** in Washington, D.C., which was noted by 10 Advocates. Six specifically mentioned the **relationships with the other Advocates** in the cohort, while four mentioned their **relationships with their Advocacy Advisors**. Four mentioned liking the monthly webinars and ongoing learning opportunities provided by the program.

Other favorite aspects of the program were more about the culture of the program:

- Several Advocates noted that they appreciated the program staff **listening to their feedback** and adjusting program delivery quickly when needed. This responsiveness by the staff made Advocates feel heard and valued. In general, Advocates felt very taken care of and nurtured during their time in the program.

- A few Advocates mentioned finding the **consistent reminders about deadlines and due dates** to be helpful, especially since these reminders were delivered with lots of support and patience when Advocates fell behind.

- Two Advocates mentioned their appreciation and excitement for having been involved in other MENTOR projects during their time in the Youth Advocates for Mentoring program. One mentioned their excitement about being able to participate in a programmatic effort, with another sharing positive experiences from presenting on a webinar MENTOR led on the impact of COVID-19 on mentoring relationships. Both of these youth appreciated the trust MENTOR placed in them to present at these events and were excited to share their knowledge and experiences more broadly.

Most Advocates were able to name multiple aspects of the program that they enjoyed, suggesting that even when one component wasn’t enjoyable or ideal (e.g., a relationship with an Advisor or a
disappointing meeting with a senator’s office) they were still able to find other meaningful experiences and have a positive experience overall.

“My favorite part is kind of more of an atmospheric thing. All throughout this program, I have felt personally really taken care of and I feel really valued also. And that means a lot to me because I’ve done programs like this before or done stuff where people try to make it out to be, ‘Oh, we care about what you have to say, but we’re also going to kind of tell you what to think.’ I just never liked that, but never realized the effect that it really has on your own individual thinking. So, the whole program was a lot more like, ‘Tell us where you are, what are your experiences,’ and it shows. Every time we were together in D.C., and on a video call, or in the group message, conversation just takes off, and I really think that’s because we are given space to just talk to each other, create meaningful relationships, and really dive into why we did this in the first place. So, love that for sure.”

“Overall, I’m just really grateful for this process. It kind of feels like a little dream, I don’t remember what it was like to not be a youth advocate, and I don’t know what it’s going to be like to be out of it. So, it’s just super weird ... Overall, it’s just been a really fantastic process. It has been hard, there have been sometimes I did not want to stay on the webinar until 11:00 p.m., but I did it anyway, and I’m really glad that I did because the memories that have come out of this, and even just the feeling of saying it’s done is ... I don’t even know what to compare it to, it’s just great, it’s really just great.”

Advocates’ Challenges

Although the experience of participating in this program was overwhelmingly positive for all 12 Advocates, all of them did express some challenges along the way. The most common challenge was juggling the tasks and timelines of the program while also managing responsibilities related to school, jobs, and family life. Seven Advocates mentioned this program-life balance issue specifically. Several noted that societal-level events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests around police brutality and racism, exacerbated these challenges significantly. It was clear from these interviews that this was a challenging time in the lives of these young people and that this may have been a bit of a uniquely challenging time to pilot this program.

As noted earlier in this section, most Advocates also expressed some challenge with writing their memo, with specific struggles ranging from appropriately conceptualizing the scope and focus of their topic to specific tasks such as conducting research and rewriting based on feedback.

Other challenges noted during their final interviews included:

- A desire to learn more about government early in the program, so that Advocates could better understand how their Advocacy would influence policy changes or legislative solutions.
• Wishing they understood the volume of work and overall memo-writing process earlier in the program cycle.

• As noted previously, disappointing relationships with Advisors, although this was noted by only two Advocates.

It is also worth noting that disappointment from not being able to participate in an in-person capstone event in Washington, D.C. was also a challenge for Advocates. For some, the loss of that event ended their participation on a bit of a down note. Others felt that the remote delivery of their presentations may have reduced their impact.

“Of course, COVID just made everything shift. It was a little bit disappointing. I’m not going to lie because we’ve been talking about going back to D.C. since last year. To have to be on a very tentative, “We’re trying. We’re trying to go to D.C., but it might not happen.” Then later on to find, yeah, we’re not doing it in D.C. anymore, it was a little bit discouraging. It took a little bit away of the experience. I mean, I’m not knocking. The effort was done. The research was done. That didn’t really affect the quality of the policy memo. It was more about just that experience of being able to just dress up and meet all of us together.”

Advocates’ Feedback for Program Improvement

There were several opportunities for Advocates to give their feedback at the end of the program on things they would like to see enhanced or changed in the program and the advice they had for future Advocates in the years to come.

Survey Feedback

Advocates were asked an open-ended question in their post-program survey about what feedback, if any, they had about the program so that MENTOR could improve the delivery of the program in the future. Eight Advocates shared a response, which we offer here verbatim (emphasis ours):

• “I think explaining the policy memo and giving examples earlier like December/January would be helpful because I wasn’t sure what to do. Also, more practice in going over our policies with each other would be great!” (Note: This comment is confusing as the theme of the January training was related to memo content and examples, although the overall theme of understanding memo writing earlier was echoed by several Advocates.)

• “Have more of a set follow-up for the beginning of the program. When the beginning of the program starts and we actually start writing have a base format and writing style so we know what to expect.”

• “More frequent in-person meetups if available. More group check-ins unrelated to the program (mental check-ins, etc.).”

• “Make a group chat.”

• “Perhaps more structure for us to have more advocacy goals beyond just composing the policy memo and contacting officials. For example, guiding us through social media advocacy would have been really cool.”

• “Allow high school students to work in advocacy groups.”
• “Ensure that younger advocates are **comfortable with who their advocacy advisor is** and have more **short meetings in between big assignments** to serve as checkpoints!”

• “I think **two check-ups a month** would be good to help keep the advocates on task and always ready.”

These comments certainly echo much of the commentary already noted in this section: more clarity of task and scope of work up front, more check-ins and opportunities for support from staff, Advisors, and each other, and some sentiments that younger Advocates may need additional supports or structures to do their best work.

**Interview Feedback**

The post-program interviews were also another rich source of feedback about the program. Once again, many of the themes expressed have been mentioned previously in this section. Feedback from these interviews included:

• **More time to write policy memos**, which would also mean more time for preparing to present to Congressional offices.

• **More explanation of full scope of program activities and memo writing process** at the beginning of the program cycle.

• **Longer and more frequent monthly meetings** and check-ins, which would help further Advocate learning, keep them on task, and provide more social and support time.

• **Adjustments to monthly meeting presentations** (e.g., more interactivity, more convenient times). One Advocate also noted that one monthly webinar presenter had said things that the youth felt were not culturally appropriate or inclusive when talking to the group, although it’s unclear who this individual was or what they had said.

• **Creating a group interaction space** (rather than the Instagram group Advocates created on their own).

• **Separating older and younger cohort members** for some activities and tasks, or offering the younger members additional support and working arrangements (e.g., group work).

• **More attention paid to matching criteria** and the fit between Advocates and their Advisors (although other Advocates noted they thought the matching process produced good results).

• **Customizing the program delivery based on youth input to honor the unique composition of each cohort**, recognizing that each group will have different personalities, strengths, and challenges.

“Sure, yes, the program did have a structure going in, but I could see how it would shift a little and change a little according to our cohort’s personality. Just for every cohort to know that it is their space. It is their assignment. It is
Lastly, Advocates were asked about what advice they might have for future cohorts. Almost all of the advice offered centered around themes of hard work, time management, and facing the challenges of participation:

- Asking for help from MENTOR staff, Advisors, and each other.
- Asking questions (“There are no dumb questions!” as one Advocate put it).
- Avoiding procrastination and not delaying writing.
- Having trust in the program process and being aware of the fears they may have heading into the experience.
- A mindset of persistence, especially if they can use their passion for their issue area to maintain momentum and progress.

“Trust the process, communicate, ask for help, because you will need it, and it is totally okay to ask for help too. I just was not comfortable, I don’t know why, admitting that I didn’t know what I was doing. [Laughs] ... But it’s really okay to not know because it’s super confusing, especially when you start reading about U.S. laws that you don’t know why they exist or how they exist. You have got to talk it out with somebody. Yeah, I just needed to be a little more comfortable with asking for help earlier on. I think it would have been a lot more beneficial for the overall process in the end.”

“Really use your other youth advocates because bouncing ideas back on each other, it’s important too because you’re only one person and it’s definitely good to get different perspectives on things.”

“Just enjoy, because you’re going to learn, you know, that’s a given. You’re going to have fun, that’s a given but you just got to take it in. Be involved. I know sometimes it’s going to feel like, especially during like topics when everybody gets to discuss there’s obviously going to be those couple of people that just, they just always answer. If you have something to say ... throw it out there. Don’t be afraid to talk. I think as long as you’re engaged and having fun in this program, you can have a great time.”

This section has highlighted the positive overall experience of youth in the program. For the most part, Advocates enjoyed the Kick-Off Event and other program meetings and workshops throughout the year. They immensely valued their relationships with each other and with program staff and Advisors. They
found the process of researching, writing, and refining their memos to be challenging, but were able to persist due to a culture of supportive accountability. And while their final policy presentations were a mixed experience, and were disappointingly delivered remotely due to COVID-19, all Advocates were able to complete the full program and took pride in their accomplishments. They rated their overall experience in the program very highly, although they also offered important feedback for program improvements, as noted above.

In the next sections, we further illustrate program impact by exploring how Advocates grew their skills and future advocacy plans as a result of the program, followed by an examination of how the program changed their views about advocacy and political change in general.
Impact on Advocacy Skills, Actions, and Self-Efficacy

One of the main goals of the Youth Advocates for Mentoring program is to inspire and promote new generations of advocates who can spur needed change on a number of policy issues and community needs. To facilitate the development of new advocates, the program spends considerable time at in-person workshops and ongoing remote learning opportunities building up the skills of these youth leaders. The staff of the program and the Advisors who work with these youth also emphasize the growth in confidence and feelings of self-efficacy and agency needed to be a successful advocate. The hope is that by the time these young people leave the YAM program, they are more skilled and confident advocates who are increasingly likely to advocate for policy change that impacts their communities and nation.

To test whether the program spurred such changes in Advocates, MENTOR administered a survey to all Advocates at the very beginning and end of the program. This survey, described in more detail in the Introduction, consisted of a number of questions adapted from prior research into youth civic and political engagement. Here we discuss pre-post changes in how Advocates answered survey questions related to their perceptions of their own advocacy skills and their likelihood to engage in specific advocacy actions. We further illustrate the themes that emerge by examining the personal growth and future advocacy plans that Advocates spoke eloquently about in their post-program interviews.

Advocacy Actions

The pre- and post-program surveys asked a set of five questions about specific actions that advocates might engage in to determine the degree to which they already engaged in these actions and to assess if they might be more likely to do them after their time in YAM. Advocates were asked on a 5-point scale to rate how likely they were to engage in a number of specific activities related to advocacy (1= I wouldn’t do this; 5= I have done/will do in the future):

- Attend community meetings about an issue that affects people where I live.
- Volunteer to campaign for a political candidate.
- Contact politicians, governments, or authorities about issues that are important to me.
- Participate in a rally or protest for a cause.
- Vote in elections.

Chart 1 illustrates the pre-post responses from Advocates. None of the responses shifted much from the beginning of the program to the end, although the likelihood of voting in an election did drop noticeably. It’s worth noting that this drop was due to the responses from one participant, who also indicated that they were very unlikely to contact elected officials or the government to address their concerns, suggesting that this individual had a negative experience with their Congressional presentation and no longer feel that elected officials are responsive to the requests of the public for change. The ratings for all other Advocates remained largely unchanged, with the exception of the overall ratings for contacting government officials, which naturally increased based on the activities of the program.
**Advocacy Orientation**

The surveys also asked a series of questions around the participants’ advocacy orientations, that is, the degree to which they were leaders among their peers and sought out information and opportunities that could help them advocate on issues they cared about. Advocates were asked to rate on a 5-point scale the degree to which the following statements sounded “not at all like me” (1) or “extremely like me” (5):

- I listen to people talk about politics even when I know that I already disagree with them.
- When I see or read a news story about an issue, I try to figure out if they’re just telling one side of the story.
- I am good at leading others to reach a goal.
- My peers consider me to be a leader.
- I am usually the one who suggests activities to my friends.

**Chart 1 - Pre-Post Changes in Advocacy Actions**

![Bar chart](chart1)

**Chart 2 - Pre-Post Changes in Advocacy Orientation**

![Bar chart](chart2)

**Chart 1 - Pre-Post Changes in Advocacy Actions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Pre-score</th>
<th>Post-score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attend community</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer for political</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact government officials</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in a protest</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote in an election</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chart 2 - Pre-Post Changes in Advocacy Orientation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Pre-score</th>
<th>Post-score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listed to people talk politics</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze news articles</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead others to reach goal</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers consider me a leader</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggest activities to friends</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chart 2 shows that Advocates made meaningful gains in their perceived abilities to analyze news articles to see if they are biased, their abilities to be a leader to others in reaching a goal, and their leadership interactions with peers generally. These outcomes are all to be expected given the emphasis of the YAM program on building confidence in one’s ability to be a leader for change and in their skills in crafting compelling, research-informed arguments to support their advocacy positions.

Advocacy Skills
Advocates were also asked to rate themselves pre-post on how competent they felt at particular advocacy skills. These skills were self-rated on a 5-point scale (1= I definitely can’t; 5= I definitely can):

- Create a plan to address a problem.
- Get other people to care about a problem.
- Express my views to others in-person or in writing.
- Contact someone in a leadership position about a problem.
- Utilize social media platforms to bring attention to a cause or to spur community engagement.
- Listen to conflicting viewpoints and identify where they agree and disagree.
- Summarize what another person said to make sure I understood.

Chart 3 illustrates that Advocates improved slightly in all of the Advocacy skills areas, with the biggest gains related to getting others to care about an issue, using social media to spread advocacy messages, and summarizing other viewpoints so that others feel understood. This last area of growth is intriguing as it echoes the statements by Advocates that their Advisors were instrumental in teaching them how to craft arguments that would appeal to a broad range of ideological positions and reflecting back concerns from issue opponents in language and values that might appeal to them. This suggests that the program helped these young leaders learn to make better, more broadly appealing arguments on issues they care about, while also giving them the confidence to inspire others to care in-person and online.
Advocacy Self-Efficacy

To further explore the degree to which the program built up these young people as future leaders and advocates, the pre-post surveys asked a series of questions related to their perceptions of their own effectiveness and strengths as an advocate. While the program certainly hoped to build skills and an overall advocacy orientation, young people may not follow through on advocacy if they don’t have confidence in their abilities or support systems. To that end, we asked Youth Advocates about their level of agreement with the following statements:

- I can make a positive difference in my community.
- Even though I am a young person, there are ways for me to get involved in my community.
- I can use what I know to solve “real-life” problems in my community.
- It is my responsibility to get involved to make things better for society.
- I feel that I will be/have been successful in creating real-world changes based on my advocacy on this project.
- I have a group of adult allies (parents, teachers, community leaders, etc.) who help me with advocacy.
- I have peer allies (friends, classmates, other youth) who help me with advocacy.
- I have a good understanding of my issue area and feel knowledgeable about the topic.
- I need to learn a lot more about my issue area to be an effective advocate in the future.

Chart 4 examines the questions that most directly spoke to feelings of advocacy self-efficacy and their ability to make an impact upon the world. Youth Advocates improved slightly in all the areas except feeling like they had been successful in creating real-world changes, although it is worth noting here that this particular question was asked as “will make” at the beginning of the project and “have made” at the end, with the former perhaps representing their idealistic hopefulness for the experience of the program and the latter their assessment after the fact. It is also worth noting that the rating for the
question on feeling like they could make a difference in their community was answered at a “5” by all Advocates except one, who rated that question as a “1”—none of the other answers for that question were rated as negatively by this Advocate, so perhaps their rating here was entered erroneously. But as with advocacy actions, orientation, and skills, these ratings of self-efficacy started relatively high but were even stronger by the end of the program.

We also asked Youth Advocates about the support systems they had scaffolding their advocacy work, as well as the depth of knowledge and information they felt they had around their issue area. As Chart 5 illustrates, Youth Advocates built both adult and peer support systems that they felt contributed to their work on the project and their advocacy in general. It is especially noteworthy that, because many of the Advocates had not yet picked an issue to focus on at the time of the pre-survey, only 4 rated themselves in terms of their knowledge about their issue, with 5 expressing some opinion about whether they needed to know more or not. Given that most of the Advocates were not even sure about the topic they would be advocating for at the beginning of the program, it’s remarkable that the ratings for knowledge of issue area are so high. This suggests that Advocates learned a great deal about the topics they focused on through research and discussions with Advisors and other mentors and leaders, as noted in other sections of this report. Not surprisingly, they felt less of a need to learn “a lot more” about their areas at the end, although the rating here (3.75/5.00) suggests that most Youth Advocates seem to understand that there is even more to learn and understand about the complicated topics they chose to advocate on.

![Chart 5 - Pre-Post Changes in Advocacy Support and Knowledge](chart.png)

Broadly speaking, Advocates did not report improving dramatically from the beginning to the end of the program with regards to most of these advocacy actions, skills, mindsets, and perceptions of ability in these surveys. None of these changes approached statistical significance due to the small number of participants in this study, however, it is very encouraging to see that in almost every category,
Advocates made some meaningful improvements in their sense of self as an Advocate and the skills, knowledge, and supports they can bring to their advocacy and community leadership moving forward. Whether these changes are solely caused by the program experience offered in this pilot is unknown given the evaluation design employed here. But, these findings clearly suggest, at least from a quantitative perspective, that the program helped them grow as advocates and they perceive themselves as more skilled young leaders.

Perceptions of Personal Growth and Future Advocacy
While the quantitative findings above suggest modest growth in these areas, the qualitative findings of the interviews conducted with Advocates tell a much clearer story about the tremendous growth these young people made while in the YAM program.

During the interviews at the start of the program, Advocates expressed a wide range of views about their strengths and potential challenges heading into the program.

- They described a range of experience with politics and activism, with some indicating they “wouldn’t know where to start,” while others indicated prior experience working with elected officials and policymakers and having engaged in advocacy activities at the local level (“I already have connections with a couple of community leaders; they know me, they know my face, they know what I do.”). Most did not describe having much experience with advocacy.

- They mentioned a wide range of strengths they felt they possessed, including leadership, public speaking, analytical skills, time management skills, and networks of support.

- Ironically, many of these same strengths were noted as potential areas for growth in the same interviews, with Advocates noting a desire to improve public speaking and communication skills, self-confidence, project management, crafting an argument, patience, and establishing boundaries between the program and their other responsibilities.

Most Advocates expressed a combination of confidence in their skills, minimal experience directly applying them in advocacy contexts, and some areas where they knew they needed to grow as young leaders if they were to match the passion they felt about issues facing young people today.

Areas of Growth
It is during the post-program interviews where the full impact of the program truly comes to light. Advocates spoke openly about a number of areas of personal growth:

- **Greater clarity and focus on their issue area** – Seven Advocates specifically mentioned that their time in the program had helped them clarify the issue that they care about (e.g., moving from caring about youth access to mental health services in a wide range of institutions to focusing on educational systems in particular). Others noted that the staff and Advisors helped them to connect to others doing important advocacy work on their topic, clarifying how their work fit in with that of others. Many noted gaining key data points or frameworks for explaining their issue to others. One even noted being grateful for learning about how intermediary organizations like MENTOR play an important role in shaping policy and legislation.
• **Confidence as an Advocate** – Six Advocates mentioned feeling like they gained the confidence to speak to any authority figures about their issue area and that their confidence in their own voice had grown substantially.

• **Public speaking and presentation skills** – Six Advocates also noted that the program had forced them out of their comfort zone somewhat and built their skills and confidence with public speaking, delivering a presentation, and overall self-expression. A few in particular noted that they were naturally shy and that they overcame fears about using their voice in advocacy work.

• **Knowledge of advocacy “at the highest level”** – One of the main drivers of that growth in confidence, as noted by four Advocates, was that this program gave them the opportunity to speak directly to Congressional offices This access to policymakers — combined with a trip to D.C., plenty of teaching about how policy and legislation are crafted, and Advocacy Advisors who could detail how to make convincing presentations to elected officials — left Advocates feeling as if they could more easily do effective advocacy work at the state or local level after going through this experience with at the federal level.

• **Perseverance and the value of support networks** – Three Advocates noted that they had learned a lot about their own ability to persevere through challenges (not just the in program, but also social upheaval such as the pandemic or protests). These young people had proven something to themselves, but they also knew that they did not accomplish their goals all on their own — they also noted that asking for help and having a support system is critical to persevering.

• **General understanding of professionalism** – Two Advocates noted that the program had simply taught them a lot about how to be a professional individual, mentioning specific factors like an understanding of etiquette in certain settings while engaged in advocacy work and what “quality” presentations look like when speaking to elected officials.

The following quotes further illustrate these themes and give voice to the personal and advocacy-related growth that each Advocate spoke to.

“I feel like MENTOR and Adriane, gave me that confidence, of like, ‘You know what you’re doing. Your knowledgeable enough, and you did your own research. So, you’re an expert in this topic.’ I feel like before MENTOR, I was a little bit shy. Even though I knew information, I was like, ‘Okay, I don’t feel comfortable, because what will people say?’ MENTOR gave me that confidence of like, even if I’m wrong, I don’t … I might not know everything, but I’m capable of learning and understanding if I made a mistake … I think MENTOR gave me that confidence of, I’m capable of taking the lead in this movement or continue to advocate for fair treatment for the undocumented community.”
“I just really think that this program has helped a lot of us grow to understand each other and pretty much everything that’s happening right now in the United States. It really does ... I think this program does help people understand how government works, and how policy is created, and just how different issues impact different people, so it’s a really good program that helps people understand a lot of things.”

“I’ve learned so much more about my voice as a U.S. citizen and what that means, especially with voting and just politics in general, I feel a lot more aware. There’s still a lot of learning and growth to do over the rest of my lifetime, but I think about what I thought a year ago, and it was just not the same as it is now.”

“One area is, I think [I’ve grown] is ... the level of trust that I have in my own voice and also an understanding of advocacy on multiple levels. I used to be really shy; I didn’t value what I had to say because I didn’t think that others would. But yeah, now I realize that if it’s different if I can make a difference. And on another note, about advocacy, that advocacy is not only people talking to their government officials; [it’s] also just people talking to other people within their communities and advocating for an issue within their own network, like talking to friends about an issue that you care about or telling your family about it, maybe [is] also a different form of advocating for that issue.”

“I would say [I gained] clarity in the issues that I am focusing on. When I began the program, I was a little bit all over the place. I was very much of there’s so many problems. I’m overwhelmed. A lot needs to get fixed. How do I do this? I have a lot more clarity on the different topics that I’m most passionate about and how to address all of them so that it’s basically, I don’t have to touch every topic that I want to address all at the same time in the same level of intensity. Understanding that dynamic in how I can still make change and not have the change that I want to do have it be my career because I have other interests too. Being able to balance that not only in my policy memo and the policy organizations that I chose but just in general.”

**Future Advocacy Plans**

Lastly, Advocates were also asked in their post-program interviews about the plans they had for future advocacy coming out of this experience. They noted several key themes that suggest the program succeeded in the core goal of inspiring these young leaders to do more and better advocacy work in the years ahead.

- **Plans to continue advocacy are stronger** – A total of seven Advocates specifically mentioned future advocacy plans or actions that have been inspired by the program. Three advocates mentioned wanting to start nonprofits that would perform critical functions related to their issue areas. Two mentioned doing more with their memos, with one figuring out how to apply it
with local officials and the other working on how to present their memo to leaders from other states for a broader impact. Other themes related to future plans included building an informational website on their issue and conducting even more research to further strengthen the ideas developed in their memo.

- **Stronger connections to the community they were advocating for** – Four Advocates spoke to how their time in the program grew their connection to others impacted by or working on the topic of their memo. Multiple Advocates described strengthened networks and connections to others doing work on their topic. Others mentioned becoming more engaged with individuals impacted by the issue they were fighting to change, especially through online engagements and social media. One mentioned being grateful to have learned more about how their recommended policy change would improve their own life and the lives of other similar individuals. It seems the program not only increased determination to make change happen, but also solidified why and on whose behalf these youth were advocating.

- **Clarification of career or educational pathways** – While all advocates indicated they would keep doing advocacy work on their issue at some level, a few noted how this experience clarified their next steps in terms of education or had helped them envision an ideal career. One noted that they were going to change their field of study for college based on what they had learned in the program. Others talked about building program models or other on-the-ground solutions. One mentioned that they had found many role models who are doing work on the topic that they care about and that meeting these individuals through the activities of the program had helped them envision the type of professional and advocate that they would like to be.

The following quotes from Advocates further illustrate these themes of future advocacy and growth as leaders.

“One of the things that this program helped me realize is maybe my career pathway. I’m thinking about being a lawyer and focusing on children’s issues. I really would love to focus on this issue more. I feel being a lawyer would help give me a good platform to advocate for the children that I’m talking about and the children that I’m discussing in my policy memo. Working for a nonprofit like MENTOR, helped me just basically get the idea of what exactly a nonprofit is and what a nonprofit does. That is also something that I’m looking into in the future. Maybe starting my own nonprofit for this issue that I care about. Yeah, it definitely gave me a lot of ideas how to, you know... They gave us a lot of tools and skills too. They taught us how to be an effective advocate. Yes, I definitely plan on utilizing those in the future.”

“I don’t see myself stopping anytime soon unless somebody makes me and I don’t even think anybody can make me ... no, my longest-term goal — dream, call it really — I want to establish a nonprofit and have a location in every state for K-12 youth.”
“Yeah, definitely [will continue to advocate], especially because I don’t feel like it ended in a way that is comfortable for me. I’m going to need to see a little bit more [Laughs] come out of all of this work. It doesn’t have to be with [Senator 1] or [Senator 2], that is okay. But I really think there’s stuff that I can do locally, and this whole process has helped me identify some of those resources and things that I need to change here [in my city/state] first, or want to change here first. So, that’s awesome.”

“I do have plans to develop a nonprofit. Education would be a prominent aspect of that. Within my career, I would also want to, maybe not focus on it solely but have projects that hit my policy recommendations. The career that I’m going to be pursuing is in industrial organizational psychology. It very much goes hand in hand in the structural differences that I want to do and the recommendations that I’ve done and all of that.”

Taken as a whole, the findings of this section indicate that the YAM program helped Advocates grow in meaningful ways. These youth have reported, in both quantitative and qualitative responses, that the program grew their confidence as advocates and leaders, built specific advocacy skills, helped them understand how to make convincing advocacy presentations at the highest levels of government, and connected them to a network of adults that both inspired them and solidified their future plans to do more targeted and effective advocacy in the future.

The next section of this report details how their experience in the program changed Advocates’ general views on the effectiveness of advocacy and the prospects for political change.
Impact on Views on Advocacy and Political Change

The final category of findings from this pilot examines how participating in the program may have influenced Youth Advocates’ perceptions of advocacy work and political change in general. Given the design of the program and the findings noted in the previous two chapters, it seems clear that this effort provided tremendous growth in confidence and skills around advocacy. But it’s also worth exploring whether the experience of building out a policy memo, receiving training and coaching around the nuances and complex nature of advocacy, and the experience of actually doing direct advocacy at the federal level changed how these young leaders felt about the potential of advocacy to foster real change in America. Did the experience of advocating at this high-level change how they felt about the ability of average citizens to influence the country around them?

To explore this theme, Youth Advocates were asked a series of questions in their pre- and post-surveys in which they were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements:

- In America, some groups do not have access to equal power.
- In America, political leaders only listen to the opinions of certain groups.
- In America, certain groups have fewer chances to get ahead.
- The political system in America (branches of government, political representatives, government laws and regulations, etc.) is responsive to the genuine needs of the public.
- I feel that advocacy efforts in general are successful in creating positive change.

As Chart 6 illustrates, the views of Youth Advocates on the equity of the nation’s policymaking did not change in a meaningful way. At the end of their experience, they still largely felt that some groups do not have equal opportunities to participate in government, that leaders do not listen to all their constituents, and that some groups have fewer chances to get ahead — likely as a result of the other factors. However, there was a small uptick in feelings that the political system does respond to the
needs of citizens (although this was rated fairly low pre- and post) and that advocacy, in particular, is a successful vehicle for political change in the nation.

These results are unsurprising given the current political and social climate in the nation as a whole, with public confidence in a variety of American institutions and leadership plummeting in recent years and especially in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread protest in the wake of several high-profile incidents of police brutality during the time period of this pilot. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that in spite of all of the turmoil of 2020 that this group of young people ramped up their engagement in the political process considerably (often for the first time) and came through the experience feeling more positive that efforts like theirs will make a difference. As noted in the earlier chapters, these Youth Advocates spoke very positively at the end of the program about their future advocacy plans and the notion that they were just getting started as young leaders with a lot to offer their respective movements.

It will be important for future cohorts of Youth Advocates to be compared against a group of their peers to see whether the program acts in a protective manner against the erosion of trust and increasing cynicism about government and political change that often accompanies the teen and young adult years. The program may not have radically improved their beliefs in the responsiveness of American leadership on their issues, but it does not seem to have damped their hopefulness and desire to help either.

**Interview Findings on Political Change**

During their initial **pre-program interviews**, Youth Advocates spoke openly about themes related to political change and power, their thoughts on the receptiveness of government to advocacy and similar grassroots efforts, and their hopes that they would be successful promoting real-world change as part of the program.

Advocates often described their hopes for the year, particularly as it related to directly engaging elected officials and getting them to care about their chosen issue:

> “A lot of our politicians in my state don’t focus enough on [my chosen issue] … I think that if I’m able to advocate for that issue to [politicians] then maybe they’ll open their eyes and see that, ‘Okay, yes, it is a problem.’ And they can do something about it instead of waiting] for the youth to act on it in a couple of years.”

Although many were optimistic about their ability to make progress, their hopes were typically tempered with an understanding of the challenge ahead:

> “I mean, of course, it’s definitely going to be a challenge because, especially when you’re going to such high authorities, they really won’t take such a young kid seriously.”

Advocates also expressed many thoughts on systems of power in America, touching on a wide variety of public and private institutions and systems that they felt contributed to the issues they cared about, including branches of government, corporations and capitalism, the military, and the healthcare system, as well as national and local nonprofits they thought were fostering positive change.
Many particularly emphasized the power of corporations and the role of money in society:

“At the top of the power would be your outside influences ... your major companies, McDonald's, like Taco Bell ... the next assets would be your wealthy ... millionaires, billionaires, etc. who own maybe oil companies and things like that.”

One advocate also described how there is an interaction between the various power structures:

“The political structure, right, the president, Congress ... all hold power, but I also think that corporations hold an enormous power ... It’s not necessarily a black and white, very defined boundary within the different levels of power ... it can be all intertwined.”

Advocates also expressed thoughts on the individuals who they thought wield power, both in causing societal issues and trying to address them. Advocates described how elected officials at various levels of government have power to enact policies:

“People working on the state level or even on the city level definitely do have a say of what gets enacted. And if it goes right, they’re representing the voice of the people, right?”

A few described how the electorate or “the people” also has the power to respond when they feel that their voices are not heard:

“I always say that people hold also a lot of power and of course, voting is a power in itself but there’s also other forms of it like whether it be protesting or whether deciding where purchases, where your money goes towards and that ultimately supports whichever owner of a product.”

Advocates described how powerful institutions or individuals may use their platform to make positive changes in society:

“I guess as an example, someone who is powerful or their voice is powerful like when Kim Kardashian posted on Twitter about having the judges, the pardon for the execution of Ronnie Reed and her posting that and writing to the judge of Texas so they can pardon the execution. I guess that's an example of someone who has a powerful voice because she has the attention of the public.”

However, they also described that these platforms may also be used for corruption or inaction:

“The NRA ... funds a lot of our politicians is. So, a lot of our politicians say they’re going to do something about gun violence, but when the NRA gets in their ear and starts saying, ‘We won’t fund you anymore. We won’t help you out anymore,’ then those politicians ... change their script on the American people.”
Several described how young people have the power to influence change and engage with elected officials:

“So, I think that young people have power; it’s just how long it takes for the change to occur can vary.”

However, most also discussed how did not expected politicians to listen to young people in most occasions:

“I think that some of them [politicians] are [responsive to young people] but that would be a select few or the young people would have to be interested in something that benefits them in order for them to be interested. I think usually people in power in government don’t really listen to what the youth have to say. They usually value older adults’ concerns more, just because I think they think that youth are incapable.”

Surprisingly, these themes about power and political action did not come up as frequently in the post-program interviews as they did in the initial discussions. This was primarily related to the nature of the questions in the second interview, which tended to focus more on the experience of having participated in the program and their feedback about how to improve the Advocate experience. There were a few instances, however, where youth did note frustration with elected officials and their receptiveness to the ideas expressed by some advocates.

One Youth Advocate did express some concern that the current bipartisan political climate and general state of the nation may preclude the types of large-scale reforms they were advocating for during this program:

“Some of the reasons why I had to take a step back once I presented it [the memo], I had to realize there’s a couple of different factors that are intervening, like the current political climate, and what the United States on a social level is going to look like for the next 10 to 15 years. So, doing a social program of that magnitude might not be something that would be advisable for the next 20 to 30 years, perhaps after, you know what I mean. Maybe in the future, but I’m not sure what it would look like. Similar to the model, but something more adapted to the time.”

Several Advocates felt, based on their experiences with their memo presentation, like the prospects for meaningful political change on their particular issues were small, noting that the severely partisan nature of the current political climate leaves some politicians unreceptive to the needs expressed by their constituents:

“In the second office, the staff person didn’t ask any questions whatsoever. It was on a video call and her face just looked generally uninterested. I don’t think I really caught their attention and made them like, "We have to do something about this." I didn’t expect that to happen anyway, so it wasn’t discouraging ... I would say probably the difference in political views played a big part of it. My policy memo I was asking for a lot of funds to be allocated for mental health programs and stuff like that. The people who I
was presenting to are more conservative and that’s not really on their agenda really.”

Conversely, another Advocate, when asked what contributed to the success of her policy memo meetings, indicated that the partisanship of their elected officials made them more receptive to their policy ideas and clarified common ground to build upon in their meeting:

“Yes, for sure. The office of [Senator 1] and her politics are somewhat progressive. And, [Senator 2], she is a huge champion of education. So, I think that is something that made this meeting a good experience, because they already advocate for these kinds of issues. I feel like my recommendations are kind of, pushing them a little more to do more for the undocumented community and our public education and post-secondary education.”

Finally, a few Youth Advocates felt like they made connections to elected officials or their staffers that perhaps transcended politics, with one noting a shared family military background and other finding comfort in a shared sexual identity:

“It’s like, some of these senators and representatives don’t look like us so what are their staffers going to look like? Are they going to look like us as well or not? I know personally, from my first meeting with [Senator] in his office, the staffer had told me. He was like, ‘Yeah, I’m a gay man so I hear you. I look back at my high school experience ... ’ He was like, ‘I had it good but I did have a lot of friends who didn’t have it good, so I hear that.’ To find that connection, to have that person who’s not just like, ‘Oh, I’m writing these notes.’ Like, ‘Oh, this is my childhood as well,’ it felt as if like there was one person who I knew regardless, was going to be in my corner just because of that connection we shared.”

These quotes illustrate that these Youth Advocates gained valuable experience through the program and, combined with some of the skills and areas of growth detailed in previous chapters, suggests that these young leaders will continue to fight for the issues they are passionate about and look for allies both in their communities and in their elected officials. If there is one quote from our dozens of hours of interviews that summarizes this strengthened commitment to ongoing advocacy, even in the face of political indifference, and the value of this program as a whole, it is this one:

“I feel like MENTOR and the youth advocates program gave me the foundation and network to advocate for my issue and elected officials in the community know that it’s an issue that matters to my community, and the undocumented community. [Even] if we do have an immigration reform for recipients or Dreamers, there will be a lot of students who are going to be left out, and immigration is something that never stops. I feel like my goal is to pass something permanent to make the education journey for undocumented students ... make it a little easier for future generations. That’s how I see it. I feel like MENTOR gave me that platform and network.”
Conclusions and Recommendations

This pilot year of the Youth Advocates for Mentoring program provided the initial cohort of 12 Youth Advocates with an experience that they cherished and meaningful opportunities for growth as young leaders. Based on the results detailed in previous chapters, it is clear that this model holds great promise as a way of empowering young people to engage in high-level advocacy, both in the current moment and for the rest of their lives. Our findings here suggest that the program:

• Teaches advocacy skills, such as conducting research and framing arguments for bipartisan appeal, that can be applied well beyond the efforts of the program year, even to youth who do not have much prior experience with this kind of leadership opportunity;
• Builds confidence in public speaking skills and engaging elected officials, in addition to helping youth feel empowered to use their voice, generally;
• Strengthens youth identity as a leader and someone who can facilitate change on behalf of others;
• Builds networks of support both during the project and for ongoing work in the issue area Advocates have identified; and
• Leaves Youth Advocates with a nationally distributed policy memo that serves as a legacy of their efforts and a jumping off point for future conversations with public and private sector leaders.

This evaluation has also highlighted several aspects of program implementation that seemed to facilitate these outcomes, including:

• A dedicated project lead at MENTOR who managed the cohort’s experience, facilitated all learning opportunities, problem solved implementation barriers, and served as a de facto mentor to the cohort as a whole;
• An in-person Kick-Off meeting in the nation’s capital that inspired participants and immediately built strong relationships and a collaborative culture;
• Skilled professional Advisors who could help refine Advocates’ ideas, support policy memo drafting, and teach intricacies of political persuasion;
• Monthly ongoing learning opportunities and constant communication to keep busy Advocates on schedule and receiving feedback; and
• A celebratory end to the program that, in more cooperative circumstances, would have culminated with an in-person day of presentations and a chance to experience the “family” atmosphere of the program one last time.

But as with all evaluations of pilot programs, there are several lessons learned and insights for future iterations of this model that are also worth noting here.

Potential Changes and Improvements on Program Implementation

• Develop a Youth Advocates for Mentoring Facilitator’s Guide to scale the reach and impact of the program by supporting local and state programs interested in creating a similar initiative.
• Change program age eligibility to 18-24 years old to strengthen relationship building among young people, ensure appropriate developmental skills and supports, and increase individual accountability which often comes with older youth.
• Switch from developing individual policy memos to working collaboratively on group policy memos focus specifically on mentoring and youth development policy issues to increase. This would foster collaboration, create efficiencies around the memo review and editing process, and allow MENTOR to better leverage key national partners as policy advisors and ensure appropriate level of expertise on policy memo issue areas.

• Leverage MENTOR’s Learning Management System and an Online Community of Practice platform to enhance communication and engagement of Advocates through the use of message boards, resource libraries, and file sharing capabilities.

• Allocate resources to eliminate internet access issues Youth Advocates may encounter.

• Increase trainings and ongoing supports for selected Advisors.

• Exploration of policy memo process starting when program begins to ensure comprehensive understanding of process.

Considerations for Future Research
Future research and evaluation on this program model will likely be driven by the size and geographic distribution of the cohorts in coming years. Different configurations or implementation strategies would likely drive different research questions and methods. But based on the outcomes and potential mediating and moderating factors discussed in this report, there are several key aspects of the program that could be explored, such as:

• Testing whether factors such as youth age, issue area focus, prior advocacy experience, or quality of relationships with Advisors and mentors moderate the outcomes of the program;

• Examining whether cohort size or composition impacts youth’s perceptions of the culture of the program and their level of engagement;

• Assessing the impact of new program features or variations, such as increased training and preparation of mentors, a redesigned monthly training curriculum, or expanded opportunities for group work or smaller “teams” of Advocates all focused on one issue;

• Tracking youth participants over time to assess future advocacy activities and shifts in attitudes and behaviors in the years after the program;

• Ideally, including a comparison group of similar youth and following them alongside a cohort (or more) of Youth Advocates to establish more directly that participation in the program is driving key outcomes.

MENTOR plans on seeking additional funding over time for both process and outcome evaluation so that we may better understand how to optimize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for many of the nation’s unsung youth leaders.