



Photo Credit: Sound Transit

Accelerating Transit Equity with the Next Generation of Young Leaders

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

The
**BUILD
HEALTH**
Challenge®

The Youth for Equitable Streets (YES) Fellowship positions young leaders in Seattle to conduct and publish peer-reviewed community research, provide recommendations, and advance initiatives that create more equitable built environments.

This project creates spaces for young people to advocate and organize for systemic change within public transportation. In partnership with the local hospital and transit agency in Seattle, young people's engagement in improving public transportation systems is increasing transit access for communities of color in Seattle.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



Transportation
Choices

Porsesh Policy
Research Institute

40+ nonprofits and agencies that are part of the
Healthy King County Coalition

COMMUNITY IMPACT



Recruited and supported the second and third YES Fellow cohorts; finalized a leadership curriculum; and provided public education by and for youth to access free rider benefits.



Supported YES Fellows to conduct two studies with the Transportation Choices Coalition (TCC) on youth perspectives of public transportation access and utilization, as well as transit safety and equity.



Included young people from 448 youth groups in 46 cities across the state of Washington in focus groups about transportation.



Developed a set of youth-led policy goals to educate riders on safety and equity issues.



Engaged all three Seattle transit agencies in adopting a bystander intervention and de-escalation training module, with pilot training planned for summer 2026.



Collaborating at the Intersection of Transit and Health

In Seattle, the Healthy King County Coalition has been working on health equity for nearly a decade, spanning issues such as nutrition, tobacco and other drugs, food access, and the built environment. “Healthy King County is a coalition of 40 organizations that do health equity work that share an emphasis on community-first leadership, inviting members of the community to participate — not just in our meetings and coalition meetings, but frequently we do listening sessions and focus groups,” said Ben Yisrael, the coordinator for the Healthy King County Coalition.

Transportation — how people get from place to place — is directly connected to health outcomes. Reliable, affordable transportation shapes whether people can reach healthcare, healthy food, school, work, and other essentials that influence health. Yisrael explained: “Transportation connects to women’s rights, to Black and Indigenous rights, to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community, to mental health and houselessness, to access to clinics and vaccines, to people who don’t live in the county or city getting to work and getting back to work. There’s not a social justice issue or an economic issue that isn’t impacted by transportation because it determines how quickly you get your vaccine, how quickly you get your checkup, how quickly you get to work, how quickly the police or the ambulance comes.”

The YES Fellowship was launched in 2018 by the Healthy King County Coalition to focus on the next generation of leaders improving transportation and the built environment. Since the fellowship’s creation, successive cohorts of high school students have led community-based research and initiatives to make Seattle’s transit system more accessible and equitable for young people. “Movement

means freedom,” said a youth leader from Seattle’s Youth for Equitable Streets (YES) Fellowship in a [2023 public service announcement](#). “I became a YES Fellow because I was concerned about pollution,” another member explained in the public service announcement.

The Healthy King County Coalition and YES Fellows helped to champion an influential \$16 billion transportation infrastructure funding package called “Move Ahead Washington.” In 2022, the state legislature passed this package, which included a requirement to make fares zero cost to riders 18 and younger — a significant policy win that serves as a testament to the power of youth organizing in Seattle.

In a May 2023 article published in Health Promotion Practice Journal, the first cohort’s authors wrote: “Transit access is an important component of affordable mobility across the life span. In our county (King County, Washington), youth take an estimated four million transit trips each year...For many young people in our region, access to local transit systems via free or low-fare One Regional Card for All (ORCA) card is more than just a transit pass. It enables

access to resources and opportunities across King County that improve health, education, and economic outcomes. Barriers within transportation systems impede equitable access for communities of color to such opportunities. Youth, particularly youth of color, should be centered in removing barriers and advancing mobility justice.”¹

Lara Sim, a long-time healthcare partner at Seattle Children’s Hospital, recalled: “When it came time to talk about the policies that drive some of the upstream determinants of health in the built environment, youth concluded that a free bus pass was necessary. That was the policy systems change they wanted to focus on. They treated it like a campaign. And when youth get excited, they fully blossom. When it came time to educate the County’s Regional Transit Committee — our joint powers authority that helps to set transportation policy in King County — these youth showed up at those board meetings, and they organized, and they made posters, and it was beautiful. And they won. Free transit for all youth in King County. They did that.”

Equitable public transportation remains critical as Seattle continues to change rapidly. As Yisrael explained, “Youth ridership is now free, and that was really critical and reflective of the environment that we are in. With rapid gentrification, dealing with built environment issues of fair access to transportation — and making sure that everyone that lives in Seattle has that access — has been important as we’ve seen it become a tech capital in the United States.”

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— BEN YISRAEL

Healthy King County Coalition

¹ Vahora, K. I., Dove, R. M., Par, J. B., Mustefa, L., & Saelens, B. E. (2023). Navigating health equity through mobility justice: Youth of color organizing for transportation equity in our backyards. *Health Promotion Practice*, 24(Suppl 1), 28S–40S.

Building on a History of Young People Taking Action on Transportation Equity

The Healthy King County Coalition began engaging young people in transportation and built environment advocacy because they valued young people's perspectives and lived experiences. Yisrael explained: "Lived experiences are not a secondary or anecdotal type of data to us. Almost all of the organizations in the coalition have some type of youth programming, so having youth involved as advocates and participants in this work is very important, and having those intergenerational relationships from youth to elders because it takes the entire community to make an impact. Youth have information and ideas that some older people don't have, and those older generations have their own experience in organizing. Bringing all those groups together is a really important part of the work that we see in Seattle."

When the Healthy King County Coalition applied to The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) in 2023, the first YES

cohort was already underway and the free rider campaign was shifting from advocacy to implementation and public education. With the BUILD award and associated technical assistance support, the YES Fellowship was able to finalize its leadership curriculum, recruit and support the second and third cohorts, and provide public education by and for youth to access free rider benefits. Lara Sim from Seattle Children's Hospital partnered with the Coalition and provided matching funding for the project. She reflected on their collaborative role: "We want to invest in the people, the organizations, the collaborations that do it even better than we could. That's worthy of that type of place-based investment. So it was a very easy yes for us to do, and we wouldn't have gotten there as easily as we did if we hadn't already been collaborating in multiple spaces over multiple grants for multiple years."





The Cascade Effect: Driving Research & Policy Change

The YES Fellowship engages a cohort of high school students over a period of two years in leadership training, research, advocacy, and skill-building that culminates in a peer-reviewed project determined by the students themselves. They recruit Black/African-American, African-born, and Asian-American young people living in South Seattle, SeaTac, and Tukwila who are part of Coalition member organizations and youth programs. Fellows get a monthly stipend for two years to support their engagement and the time commitment required.

Fellows meet twice a month for a leadership curriculum that blends guest speakers, local nonprofit and policy expertise, and independent research training. As Yisrael explained: “Our plan is to educate and equip young organizers with the tools needed for policy change.” In their second year, the Fellows identify a community issue, conduct original research in collaboration with Dr. Brian Saelens from Seattle Children’s, and present their findings in peer-reviewed journals and public forums.

YES Fellows describe themselves as “co-conspirators” and “co-learners.” The YES Fellowship equips young people across the lifespan of an advocacy effort: from establishing an evidence base for policy changes, to advocating for change, to ensuring policies are fully implemented.

“The first cohort did a lot of advocacy and work on the project that got youth ridership free,” said Yisrael. “The second cohort worked with King County Metro to educate youth about the program. The third cohort did workshops with Transportation Choices and King County Metro to train people on the resources they have access to, and to find

out what gaps there are and what they still need to improve. They’ve been building on each other, and all of their research has been focused on youth. Because they’re reaching out to other youth 16 to 25, this most recent cohort focused on barriers to transportation for youth in the LGBTQ and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) community. They considered not only safety from a physical standpoint in the sense of harassment, but safety in the context of COVID and other biological threats to safety, as well as how well people actually understand how to use the system.”

Sim refers to the cohorts as having a “cascade” effect from one to the next, with each group using the work of previous fellows as a jumping-off point for their work. And while the number of YES Fellows is small at two to three each year, the impact is far larger. The first cohort’s work on the free rider campaign helped deliver results that were staggering in scale: in 2023, Washington transit agencies reported that more than 14.8 million passengers under 18 rode transit for free. When youth ridership on Washington State Ferries is added, that number grows to more than 16.5 million fare-free youth passenger trips.

The second cohort of YES Fellows recruited young people for focus groups from 448 youth groups in 46 cities across the state, whose voices informed their 2023 “Youth Perspectives on Transit Increasing Access and Utilization” study conducted with the Transportation Choices Coalition (TCC). In the report they wrote: “We know that fares are just one part of the equation. Distance to stops, frequency of routes, overall travel time, and many other factors continue to act as barriers for many to access transit. With the new free youth fares in place, we wanted to better learn how

young people view transit and what improvements would make it easier for them to become lifelong riders.” One young person’s voice captured some of the barriers plainly: “There was a time when I needed to get somewhere. I wasn’t in a rush but I had to wait hours for a bus to turn up, and I know for some people who depend on that sort of transportation it’s really, not only inconvenient, but it’s really scary at some point because I don’t wanna wait two hours in order to get somewhere on public transportation.”

This cohort outlined detailed recommendations — including developing youth ambassadors and improving real-time transit tracking — and presented their findings to key Seattle stakeholders at a Youth Advocacy Workshop. They closed the report with a call to action to invest in broader upstream social services like crisis intervention for people experiencing mental health or substance use disorders. They called for deeper investments in health and social

services and better ways to connect young people to resources. They suggested transit agencies partner with nonprofits and agencies to ensure people get equitable access to the services they need. They also envisioned new transit investments in overlooked communities, including expanding better transit to communities that depend on public transportation to reach jobs, healthcare, and social supports.

The process also taught YES Fellows something important: passing legislation is only half the battle. “It’s one thing to pass legislation, but just because legislation passes doesn’t mean people know about it,” said Yisrael. “Part of what has been funded by the BUILD award is the actual public education of young people, making sure they know what they’ve won and how to use it.” Youth ridership and appreciation for the program are important drivers of continued public funding.

Young People are Paying Attention

Continuing their work to strengthen how public transit systems can meet the needs of young people, the third cohort published a report in November 2025 called “Transit Safety & Equity: The Lived Experiences of Seattle’s Youth.”

They set out to answer the research question: What safety risks hinder ridership among BIPOC and/or LGBTQ young adults in Seattle? Their target demographics included BIPOC and/or LGBTQ young adult riders on Seattle’s transportation system who are 16-25 and who ride public transportation in Seattle often.

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— CAMMI PHAM
YES Fellow

Their research found that 63% of respondents have witnessed harassment, theft, or violence while using public transit. Half of riders reported avoiding public transit altogether because of safety concerns. In addition, young riders didn’t know what to do if something happened on public transportation: 58% of young adults do not know how to call for immediate help, and 67% are not aware of how to report an incident after it has occurred.

“Access to transportation is essential to reach employment, educational opportunities, healthcare services, and affordable, nutritious groceries — all of which are basic human necessities,” said YES Fellow Cammi Pham. “In underserved communities, a lack of transportation restricts residents’ abilities to access affordable grocery stores that carry high-quality products and diverse selections. As a result, residents are forced to rely on inexpensive, low-quality meals or fast food. Over time, this diet negatively affects their health by contributing to high cholesterol, high blood pressure, insulin resistance, and inadequate intake of fiber and essential vitamins.”

Some safety incidents on public transit also stem from systemic issues like untreated mental health or substance abuse issues. Whether someone feels unsafe riding or something unsafe happens when they do, the YES Fellows are trying to address everyone's need to get from one place to another because equitable and safe transit is a basic need that influences whether you can lead a healthy life.

To respond to their findings, YES Fellows developed a community-based bystander intervention and de-escalation training program and advocated for government funding to support it. "A lot of youth simply don't know what to do in a crisis situation or if they're being harassed," shared Yisrael. "This YES cohort is working on bystander training from a community perspective that they want the government to fund."

This cohort presented their findings at a May 7, 2026 Transportation Symposium co-hosted with the Porsesh Policy Institute and the Transportation Choices Coalition. With over 50 participants and key institutional attendees, they shared their findings with the Washington Department of Transportation, Sound Transit, and King County Metro. At this event, Porsesh also presented its own study on transportation barriers among African immigrants, which produced findings nearly identical to the YES Fellows'

research on BIPOC and LGBTQ youth ages 16–25 in King County. With this powerful substantiation and combined evidence base, the cohort is now in active conversations with all three transit agencies about adopting the bystander training module, with pilot trainings planned for summer 2026.

Sitting at the table as a young person is not always easy. Both peer-to-peer mentorship and guidance from trusted adults set the YES Fellowship apart. In the 2023 article, the YES Fellows reflected on this tension honestly: "We participated in many spaces dominated by professionals and established community members with political power and social influence within transit policy spheres. As youth with fewer professional experiences, we felt out of place at times: doubting our skills, feeling hesitant to provide input or feedback in public spaces, and often feeling isolated and tokenized in policy-oriented spaces. We appreciated the community leaders who took the time to explain terminology and connect with us offline to further break down concepts. YES Fellow cohort meetings were helpful spaces for debriefing policy-related meetings we attended and unpacking power dynamics we witnessed in these arenas." This kind of hands-on training and mentorship helped the YES Fellows to feel more confident in their skills over time.



In addition, exposure to new opportunities and gaining information about career pathways is an important part of the YES Fellowship. Pham attended a BUILD convening in 2025 that left an impact: “As an Informatics major with a focus in programming, I assumed that careers in equity and public health required formal academic backgrounds in fields like public health, communications, or psychology. However, I learned that studying a specific degree does not limit you to one career pathway, and attendees at the convening came from all sorts of educational backgrounds. This helped me see that there is a place for someone with a technology-focused background like mine in public sector work.”

For the Healthy King County Coalition, the learning is mutual. When Yisrael invited YES Fellows to speak at the Health Equity Summit, he thanked them for taking on the work he assumed wasn’t particularly exciting. A Fellow pushed back: “I’ll challenge you on that, Ben. I think this is very interesting. And a lot of the youth that we’ve talked to find this interesting. It’s just not something that you’re going to see in the magazines or in the newspapers, but youth are definitely interested.”

The Coalition has applied for additional funding to continue with research and supporting ongoing programming by YES Fellows, including the current cohort’s bystander training efforts. The work continues, and the Fellows are ready to lead the way.

“With the YES Fellowship, I have gained research experience, developed a strong understanding of transit equity, and am working towards meaningful intervention to help the communities I grew up in,” said YES Fellow Bitaniya Giday. “I know I will be able to bring these skills, as well as the philosophy that community-based research and partnership strengthen policy because they hold the lived experience that measures the impacts of said policies, and I am excited to continue to work with communities to create policy and laws that positively impact our society.”

Movement means freedom, and movement means health. In Seattle, YES Fellows are proving that young people can have an impact by developing new strategies to solve challenges at the intersection of health and transit.

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— **BITANIYA GIDAY**
YES Fellow



The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) invests in multi-sector, community-centered partnerships that transform systems and elevate community power to advance health and racial justice.

Through learning, connecting, and amplifying these local initiatives, BUILD champions the national movement for health equity and moves attention, resources, and action upstream to support vital community conditions for health and well-being across the United States.

The BUILD Model for Transforming Community Health



Bold

Drive fundamental shifts in policy and sustainability, creating systems-level changes through a lens of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusivity.



Upstream

Focus on the social, environmental, and economic factors that have the greatest influence on the health of a community, rather than on access or care delivery.



Integrated

Align the practices and perspectives of cross-sector partners under a shared vision, establishing new roles while continuing to draw upon the strengths of each partner.



Local

Prioritize the diverse lived experiences, voices, and leadership of neighborhood residents and community members throughout all stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation.



Data-Driven

Use varied forms of data from both clinical and community sources as tools to identify key needs, measure meaningful change, and facilitate transparency amongst stakeholders in order to generate actionable insights.

BUILD's fourth cohort (2023-2026) was made possible with generous support from:

BlueCross and BlueShield of North Carolina Foundation
Blue Shield of California Foundation
The de Beaumont Foundation
The Episcopal Health Foundation
The Kresge Foundation
The Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health
Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas, Inc.
Missouri Foundation for Health
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Trinity Health
Vitalyst Health Foundation
The W.K. Kellogg Foundation

