

2025 YOUTH STATE OF THE CITY REPORT



YOUTHCITY GOVERNMENT'S REPORT TO MAYOR MENDENHALL, CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS, AND THE SALT LAKE CITY COMMUNITY *"Belonging and Creating Community"* April 15th

Overcoming Your Fears

Hi! My name is Fatma Ozkanlar, and I'm a senior at East High School. District 6. I can't even begin to explain how happy and grateful I am to be a part of YouthCity Government. Being a member of YCG has been such a meaningful experience, and it truly added so much to my life.

Honestly, I wish I wasn't reading this from a piece of paper. I'd much rather speak freely, looking you in the eyes and letting my expressions tell the story, too. But since I only moved here from Türkiye (the country you might know as Turkey) last year, I still face some challenges with English. That's why I thought I might not be able to fully express myself if I spoke without notes.

I'd like to share a little about how and why I joined YCG. Back in Türkiye, I was a very social person. I participated in many clubs and activities and loved being involved in my community. When I moved to the U.S., I was nervous that I might lose that part of myself. Everything was new: the place, the people, and, of course, the language. I worried that not speaking perfect English would stop me from connecting with others.

But I didn't let those fears stop me. I believe that there are four basic steps to overcoming challenges and finding success:

1. **Wanting it.** I truly wanted to be part of something meaningful again, like I was back home.
2. **Believing in yourself.** I had to believe I could do it even if I wasn't sure how.

3. **Knowing your needs.** This step is so important. Before you can fully believe in yourself, you have to understand what support or skills you still need.
4. **Taking action.** Nothing changes unless you take that first step.

When I heard about YCG, I knew I wanted to join. I also knew I had a lot to learn, especially about communicating in English. I asked myself: *Will people understand me? Will I understand them?* Even with those questions, I applied. Not long after, I got the amazing news: I was officially accepted into YCG!

YCG's purpose is to help young people grow into strong, capable leaders by challenging them to face their fears and build on their strengths. That's exactly what it has done for me. I will never forget this experience, the people I've met, and the supportive team that believed in me every step of the way.

Thank you so much.

Learning to Lead

My name is Louise Pedersen. I'm an 11th grader at Highland High School, and I live in District 4. I'm incredibly grateful to be here today to share my experience as a member of YCG. What I've appreciated most this year is being part of projects that focus on supporting and uplifting young people in our community.

One of the most meaningful experiences was this past November when YCG helped organize and facilitate the Student Unity Summit to Eradicate Hate. At the summit, we worked alongside other students to develop programs aimed at addressing hate-motivated violence and bullying in our schools. It was a powerful event not only because of the ideas we generated but also because it created space for students to share their personal stories and learn from community leaders who have been doing this work for years.

What stood out to me most was seeing just how ready young people are to create change. The passion and potential are there, but what's often missing are the tools, the access, and the connections. That's what YCG provides. It empowers youth to engage with real issues and gives us the chance to sit at the table with city leaders and elected officials.

Throughout the year, we've had opportunities to speak with policymakers and learn how the legislative process works. That experience was transformative for me. I remember how inspiring it was to talk with representatives, local officials, and advocacy groups, which gave me a new sense of possibility and a deeper understanding of how change happens.

But I've also experienced frustration. During this legislative session, I was disheartened by the passing of certain anti-LGBTQ+ bills, particularly the ban on Pride flags in schools and government buildings. Policies like this don't just silence expression, they send a harmful message that queer people, especially queer youth, don't belong. It's painful to witness, and it motivates me to push for better.

That's why one of YCG's final projects for this year has been especially meaningful. We've started drafting a policy proposal to implement an inclusive anti-bullying policy in our city, one that specifically protects LGBTQ+ youth in youth spaces. LGBTQ+ youth are at a disproportionately high risk for bullying and mental health challenges. Inclusive policies have been proven to foster safer, more supportive environments where everyone can thrive.

We're proud to be working on this proposal and even more excited to continue this work beyond our time in YCG. Making our city and our state a safer place for *all* young people. This is not just possible; it's necessary.

Thank you for allowing me to speak today.

Finding Your Voice

Hello! My name is Christina Wu. I'm a senior at Skyline High School, and I live in District 5. This is my first year in YCG, and honestly, I wish I had found out about it sooner! It's been an incredible opportunity to use my voice, contribute to improving our community, and learn more about how our city functions and how legislation directly affects it.

Today, I'd like to speak about public transportation.

First, I want to express my concern over the recent passage of S.B. 195, *Transportation Amendments*. From my perspective, this legislation limits the city's ability to plan and manage its

transportation systems. I hope that in the future, this bill is either repealed or its impact is minimized so that our city can retain more autonomy in shaping our transportation infrastructure.

Second, I'd like to address the stigma around using public transportation, especially among youth. Many students avoid it because of safety concerns, cleanliness, or simple unfamiliarity. I've taken the bus alone a few times and found it to be a valuable resource. But I also understand the hesitation. A big factor is how the environment around bus stops impacts our comfort and perception. Many stops are marked by just a sign—no shelter, no lighting, no seating. It may seem minor, but something as simple as a bus stop shelter makes a huge difference, especially in bad weather or in unfamiliar neighborhoods.

Another challenge is how difficult it can be to navigate public transportation without prior experience. First-time riders often don't know how the system works—where to get on or off, how to read a schedule, or what to do if they miss their stop. Improving maps at bus stops or making real-time schedules and routes more accessible will make a big difference and encourage more people, especially youth, to give transit a try.

Finally, I want to thank you for the work you've done to improve Salt Lake City's transportation system. Compared to many other cities, we're doing great things. Even though I don't attend school in the Salt Lake City School District, I was really happy to see that students there can ride UTA for free with their school ID. That's a huge step in making public transportation more accessible, and I hope similar programs can expand throughout the state.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today!

Finding Myself Through Service

My name is Jeamediteri Rivuzimana, but I go by Medi. I'm a senior at East High School and live in District 2. This is my first year in the YCG program.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." I wish more teenagers would take the time to reflect on the depth of that quote. In a world full of constant change and uncertainty, it reminds us that one of the most powerful ways to find meaning is by helping those around us.

My first YCG activity was a service project at the Volunteers of America Utah – Youth Resource Center. We helped organize holiday gifts for youth staying at the facility, and from that moment, I felt an immediate connection to the other YCG members. I was inspired by all the different projects they were involved in, learned about new ways to volunteer, and even picked up a legendary (and maybe too good to be true) tip on how to skip class without being marked absent.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Life’s most urgent question is, what are you doing for others?” Since 2002, YCG has partnered with the Salt Lake City Mayor’s Office, the City Council Office, and the Utah Food Bank for the annual MLK Day of Service Project. This collaboration sheds light on food insecurity in our community and across the nation.

Leading up to the event, YCG students work together to raise funds for the Utah Food Bank. This year, we raised \$2,455—enough to provide 10,750 meals, which could feed a family of four for about 896 days. It’s a humble reminder that 1 in 6 children in Utah faces food insecurity and may not know where their next meal is coming from. Through our efforts and service, we aim to be part of the solution.

Being in YCG has helped me grow not just as a leader and student but also as a brother and son. It’s through experiences like these that I’ve been inspired to give back in my own way. I work at a fast-food restaurant where I earn just above minimum wage, but with every paycheck, I donate 5% to a local cause. It may not seem like much, but with organizations like the Utah Food Bank, where \$1 can provide up to \$7 worth of food, even small donations can make a big difference.

As the saying goes, *"When ye are in the service of your fellow beings, ye are only in the service of your God."*

Knowledge is Power

Hello, my name is Arianna Berchan Bridges. I’m a junior at Highland High School in District 7, and this is my first year participating in YCG. Before joining YCG, I didn’t know much about politics or how the government works. I was aware that there were problems in our country and within our government, but the constant news of changing laws, tragic events often felt overwhelming. As a young person, I didn’t think I had the power or the tools to make a difference, so I tuned it out.

Now, I'm learning that even as a student, I do have a voice, and through YCG, I'm figuring out how to use it. I decided I wanted to better understand politics and how the government functions within my community. The summer before my junior year, I joined a community-based internship called YouthWorks. Through that experience, I developed job skills and participated in community service projects. Toward the end of the program, I was introduced to YCG, a space where teens explore local and state issues and get directly involved in civic engagement and service.

It felt like this was the perfect opportunity to dive deeper into how our government works and to become more connected with my community. Through YCG, I've had endless opportunities to learn and lead. We've held meetings to plan initiatives, participated in service projects like the MLK Day of Service, and helped organize events like the Student Unity Summit to Eradicate Hate. I've even learned about proposed bills and how they could impact our lives.

Being part of YCG has helped me expand my understanding of politics and stay more informed about what's happening around me. Most importantly, I've realized that we *do* have the power to create change. As youths, our voices matter, and if we want to shape the future, we have to start now. Knowledge gives us the ability to imagine the future we want not just for ourselves but for our families and communities. The best thing we can do is get involved: understand the issues that matter to us and take action. Because at the end of the day, *we* get to decide what our future looks like.