

June 2025

LISTENING SUPPERS AT THE LANDING PLACE

Talking with Rockland- Area Youth About School, Work, & Life



Introduction

The Landing Place began hosting listening suppers in 2023 as a way to meaningfully connect with young people and their families while sharing a meal and since then eight listening and visioning events have been held in collaboration with various community partners. The goal of the listening suppers is to amplify youth voices, listen to their stories, and hear their ideas for solutions to challenges facing youth in Rockland and surrounding communities. Events focused on simple prompts aimed at inspiring conversations on topics such as school, work, family, community supports, relationships, and more.

The Place Matters project and Young People's Caucus staff collected and analyzed the notes from the May 2023–May 2025 youth events, which included on average 12 youth and 14 adult attendees. In total, there were 193 attendees at the various events, including 73 youth attendees and 54 adult attendees. Young people were middle and high school aged students from Rockland and surrounding towns, representing a variety of schools in the area. Many of these were repeat attendees who went to more than one event. This analysis provides insights into the challenges, strengths, and needs of youth in the Rockland area, but it is limited in scope as it represents a small sample of youth and is not meant to represent the experiences of all young people. This report aims to lift up the experiences and ideas coming directly from young people, with the goal of informing strategies that could improve the overall health and wellbeing of youth in Rockland and the surrounding communities.

Findings

Community Strengths & Supports

In conversations about community supports, youth highlighted many organizations and community supports that are assets to the Rockland-area community. Many named the overall value of places like **The Landing Place, Trekkers, and OUT Maine**. Some also noted alternative education and career related programs such as the **NOVA program at Oceanside High School, Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG), and Wayfinder School**. Some also talked about various Maine Department of Labor workforce programs, such as Vocational Rehabilitation, which is run through Goodwill Workforce Solutions at the Career Centers in Rockland. Many also discussed assets that were in other areas around the state such as Job Corps and Southern Maine Community College.

Many young people also named **informal community supports** as strengths of their community. These informal supports are largely focused on relationships and connections to specific community members or groups who offer help that is not part of a formal service or program. Others also discussed general events or activities of value to them. For example, youth talked about high school sports, local gyms, and restorative practices as important assets. **Youth themselves are also an asset to the community**, and peer support was highlighted by many participants. As one youth mentioned, "I like helping people, and I think I'm pretty good at listening and being a good friend."

AT-A-GLANCE

Youth Named Rockland-area Assets

- **Youth Community-based Organizations**
 - The Landing Place, Trekkers, OUT Maine and the Rainbow Ball
- **Alternative School Programs**
 - NOVA, Jobs for Maine Graduates, Wayfinder School
- **Youth and Peer Support**
- **Restorative Practices**
- **School Field Trips + Hands on Learning**
- **Youth Art Market**
- **Physical Labor Jobs**

Gaps & Youth Needs

In conversations with youth and adults, there were clear gaps and areas for expanding services to improve the support and wellbeing of young people in the Rockland area. These included a need for more transportation options, more flexible education and career pathways, family supports and restorative healing programs, innovative and realistic substance use prevention and interventions, more recreational activities, places where youth can feel autonomy, and a need for improving community safety.

TRANSPORTATION

Youth and adults both named transportation as a barrier to staying connected to work, school, and recreational activities specifically in rural areas communities that lack public transportation services

FLEXIBLE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

Youth highlighted the strength of the existing alternative education programs and expressed a desire for more flexible, supportive, and hands-on learning opportunities built into the public school system. This included a need for more work opportunities and diverse career pathways for young people in the area that can accommodate individual needs and limitations.

BOREDOM AND SUBSTANCE USE

Youth clearly expressed the connection between the lack of recreational activities and youth social spaces, or third places, and the challenges youth in the area are facing with substance use. Many talked about how they needed more recovery friendly social opportunities and activities, and peers who are sober. They also expressed a need for more adults who understand the complexities of teen substance use and can talk honestly about safety, risks, and offer help in getting sober without the fear of getting into trouble.

FEELING UNSAFE AND MISUNDERSTOOD

Many youth discussed feeling unsafe in their communities, schools, and a general sense of being misunderstood by adults. Safety concerns were based on experiences of harassment, racial profiling, discrimination, and bullying. Similarly, some youth felt that adults do not understand the experiences of young people, and often this leads to conflict and even discrimination. Many expressed a desire for community healing and intergenerational bridging opportunities in their schools and community.

What Did Youth Participants Say?

"100% transportation has prevented someone from getting a job."

"I have seen so much press on juveniles – sheds a really bad light and creates harmful narratives that are hard to get out of."

"Kids are bored. When I'm bored, I get hammered and destroy things. I have unlimited energy. What am I going to do? The rec center closes at 7."

"Flexibility is huge in schools. If you're unable to succeed in school, why are you still going? If you're not getting into things that are going to make it better for you, if you're not able to do what you can and want, then what's the point? Why are you still going?"

"All the other people I used to socialize with are using."

"People, especially adults, just don't seem to understand me! They don't listen to me."

"Sometimes kids just want to have a chill place to be without a ton of adult supervision. It's like when kids say there's nothing to do, what they're really usually meaning to say is that there's nothing to do for teenagers that doesn't involve all sorts of adults yelling at them and telling them what to do."

Youth Informed Recommendations

The following recommendations are potential solutions to gaps that may help address the needs expressed in the listening sessions. While there may be other strategies that would help support youth in the region, these ideas are informed and vetted directly by the young people who participated in these events.

YOUTH WANT...

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

More youth voice and choice in schools and connections to more diverse job options.

Youth want to get involved in their communities and schools. They want more opportunities to participate fully in decision making and have more choice in their education pathway and classes. They also expressed a need for more work options and jobs that relate to their interests and abilities.

- Youth asked for more accessible education and work options that accommodate their needs, interests, and learning styles. This includes more say in their school classes and pathways, more experiential options, and more flexibility.
- A monthly student forum was another idea for students to have their voice heard.
- Additionally, they were interested in school job fairs and youth-specific internship opportunities at local businesses.

More consistent, fun youth-specific activities and events.

Youth expressed a clear desire for more positive, pro-social, sober-friendly activities for youth in the Rockland area. Many reiterated that boredom sometimes leads to poor choices and getting into trouble. They expressed that young people just want the autonomy to have fun, play games, listen to music, and just be kids in public spaces.

- Youth, of all genders, expressed an interest in a downtown youth space that includes a skatepark and asked for more free, public spaces where youth can hang out and socialize.
- More community events like art or music festivals, or chem-free youth social events hosted by local organizations, the schools, and the Rec Center could also help fill this need.
- Youth also emphasized that these spaces need to be staffed by caring adults who create a non-judgmental space where kids can act freely like kids.

Better public transportation, support with Driver's Ed, and access to electric bikes.

Transportation is consistently noted as a barrier to staying connected to school, work, and pro-social activities. Rural youth in particular need support in gaining consistent, reliable access to transportation options in their local communities.

- Public transportation expansion was commonly recommended but is challenging in rural areas.
- Other solutions included supporting youth in obtaining their driver's license, including the cost of the course and mentors who can help them get their hours. They also need help navigating processes like finding auto insurances and flex funds to help with car maintenance.
- Youth also expressed an interest in access to alternative methods like bikes and e-bikes, which could be a city-wide program.

A safe, caring community with more connections to supportive people and places.

Youth emphasized the impact of having supportive adults in their lives, and many agreed that expanding mentorship programs and creating more supportive youth spaces would go a long way in improving youth wellbeing in the Rockland area. Youth need positive role models who can offer advice and help them navigate challenges like getting and staying sober. Many also expressed a need for more adults who remind youth that they matter.

- Many youth emphasized a need to expand on the existing assets in the community, such as The Landing Place and other mentorship programs where they can get support from trusted adults.
- They also expressed an interest in community events that promote intergenerational and cultural bridging to help build understanding and expand their sense of community. Some youth liked ideas such as having community healing circles, storytelling opportunities, and places where people can just get to know one another so everyone can feel safer.

Someone to respond and somewhere to go in a crisis.

Young people expressed a need for a 24/7 crisis response that is not connected to the police department. Many agreed that there is a need for more places to go and people to call in times of crisis without fear of punishment.

- One young person suggested a teen crisis "drop-in center," which resonated with many attendees.
- Additionally, youth expressed enthusiasm for trainings in the community and at their school on topics such as harm reduction, de-escalation, and peer support to help them support their peers and respond to high-risk situations.

Conclusion

Young people in Rockland and the surrounding communities are eager and interested in community engagement and crave a voice in local decision making. They are asking for more voice and choice in their lives, especially in school and for autonomy and freedom to be themselves. Youth need positive adult mentors who can offer support without judgement and help a young person feel heard, understood, and like they matter. Rockland-area youth are feeling the impact of community challenges with safety, and substance use, and are suggesting a need for more support for community healing and intergenerational bridging. Like young people everywhere, they also want to have the freedom to just be kids, have fun with their friends, and opportunities to explore and grow. To achieve this, the young people who attended the listening supper events have many ideas and recommendations, some of which are relatively small scale and could be implemented easily by local organizations. Others may take more time, and some larger systemic changes to policies, practices, and mindsets, but they could go a long way in improving the overall wellbeing and long-term outcomes for youth and young adults in the community.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all of the young people and adults who attended the listening suppers and for your willingness to participate and share your stories. We cannot do this without you!

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About

THE LANDING PLACE

The Landing Place youth center, located in the heart of downtown Rockland, is part of Homeworthy's comprehensive suite of services for highly resilient and often marginalized youth living in Midcoast Maine. Since opening in 2017, The Landing Place has become a hub of collaboration and support for youth and families in the community. Staff use a trauma-informed, strengths-based, restorative approach to support young people who are experiencing adversity to address barriers. The Landing Place Youth Center aims to provide a welcoming, safe space, where middle and high school aged students can engage in activities with friends, learn skills, connect with mentors, and gain access to needed resources. For more information please visit: homeworthy.org/the-landing-place



HOMEWORTHY



PLACE MATTERS

The **Young People's Caucus (YPC)** builds pathways for young people who have been directly impacted by systems involvement and systemic oppression to have a genuine voice and power in decision making in Maine. We create opportunities and connect young people, agency partners, and policy makers to work together to create public systems that support and empower all young people.

YPC is part of the Place Matters project which supports the design, implementation, and evaluation of a community-based continuum of care through systems innovation, data resources, storytelling, and community learning and engagement. While our staff work on a variety of projects, our main focus is supporting transition-aged young people, children of incarcerated parents, families, and individuals who have been impacted by the criminal legal and behavioral health systems in Maine. For more information please visit: placemattersmaine.org

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