



Youth Leadership in Action: The Washington State LGBTQ Commission and Youth Advisory Council

August 27, 2026 AI Summary

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In this LEVinar, panelists offered a detailed look at how Washington state is creating meaningful pathways for young people to influence public policy. More than a discussion about LGBTQ+ advocacy, the webinar became a conversation about representation, civic participation, intergenerational partnership, and the importance of ensuring that government reflects the communities it serves.

A Small Agency with a Big Mission

Sam Fennell, Associate Director of Operations for the Washington State LGBTQ Commission, explained that while the Commission is relatively new and small, its mandate is ambitious. Established in statute in 2019 after years of grassroots organizing, the Commission serves as an official state agency within the Governor's executive cabinet. It consists of only three staff members but works alongside fifteen commissioners and twelve members of the Youth Advisory Council.

Fennell described the Commission's fundamental role as serving as a bridge between community members and state government.

"A big way I like to describe the Commission and what we do, we're a conduit to state government for community."

The Commission gathers lived experiences from LGBTQ+ Washingtonians and helps ensure those experiences inform laws, policies, agency practices, and government decision-making. Rather than speaking for communities, the Commission seeks to amplify the voices already present within them.

A Rare Model Nationally

Commissioner Omni Romero highlighted that LGBTQ commissions like Washington's remain uncommon across the United States.

"Commissions like this are rare, and few in between."

Romero explained that the Commission's significance extends beyond policy. It creates opportunities for connection across generations and communities within the broader LGBTQ+ population.

"The Two-Spirit LGBTQIA+ community is not a monolith," Romero noted, emphasizing the importance of creating spaces where varied identities, experiences, and geographic communities can be represented.

Romero reflected on the lasting impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis and other forms of discrimination that disrupted intergenerational connections within LGBTQ+ communities:

"Many of us did not grow up with role models. We didn't have that opportunity to connect with an older generation."

The Commission, they said, operates within this historical context while working to "inspire hope and build those opportunities for our community to come together."

How the Youth Advisory Council Was Born

One of the most compelling parts of the discussion centered on the creation of the Youth Advisory Council.

According to Fennell, the Council emerged after a 2020 roundtable discussion convened by Governor Jay Inslee and twenty LGBTQ+ youth from around Washington. During that conversation, state leaders learned how disconnected official understandings of youth experiences were from the realities students were facing every day.

"We learned how much we didn't know about what was happening."

Funding was secured in 2023, and after extensive outreach, the inaugural council members were appointed in 2024. What made the process unique was that young people themselves helped shape the Council's structure and priorities.

"Instead of the adults designing it before the youth were on, we used what youth informed us of."

This commitment to youth-led design remains a defining feature of the Council.

Finding a Path Into Leadership

Both youth panelists described journeys that began in local communities before reaching state government.

Kade Grossarth previously served for four years on the board of Whatcom Youth Pride, an organization that hosts a youth-centered Pride festival and parade in Bellingham. As he prepared to move to Olympia, he wanted to continue connecting with and advocating for young people.

"I really want to connect with youth and also advocate for youth at the same time."

Ling Lomanog's path came through student leadership. As president of their high school's Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA), they regularly educated peers about LGBTQ+ issues and community building. Encouragement from mentors helped convince them to apply.

Their GSA advisor ultimately told them:

"I think you have a really strong personality. I think that you should go ahead and just give it a shot."

That encouragement launched Lomanog into statewide advocacy work.

Why Youth Voices Matter

When asked why youth councils are important, both young leaders focused on the gap that often exists between policies and lived experience.

Grossarth explained:

"There needs to be a way for youth's voices to be heard and what they need, what they are actively experiencing."

Lomanog spoke even more personally about the sense of disconnect many students feel.

"I had no idea where to start politically."

Before joining the Council, they believed advocacy mostly consisted of sharing opinions and hoping someone influential might notice.

"I thought the only thing I could do was just say my thoughts out loud and just hope I get somebody's attention from higher up."

The Council offers a different model, one that gives youth direct access to policymakers and provides an organized mechanism for elevating community concerns.

Building Community Across Washington

Another major theme was the opportunity for young people to learn from one another.

Grossarth noted that experiences differ significantly across Washington.

"My experience living in Bellingham is different than those living in Spokane or Yakima."

The Council allows youth from urban, suburban, rural, and eastern Washington communities to share perspectives, compare experiences, and develop solutions collectively.

Lomanog praised the Council's diversity.

"It's really diverse, and not only just in LGBTQ labels, but also in how we look, or how we are, how we act, and where we are on the map."

They also observed that many youth feel more comfortable speaking with peers than authority figures.

"Youth kind of feel a bit more free to talk to us about what problems that we have without being shut down."

Current Priorities and Projects

Panelists discussed numerous initiatives currently underway.

The Youth Advisory Council is gathering student feedback on legislation regarding school phone policies and financial aid programs such as FAFSA and WASFA. Council members are meeting with students throughout the state to determine whether proposed solutions align with what youth actually want.

Fennell also highlighted the Commission's groundbreaking statewide LGBTQ survey, which gathered responses from nearly 7,000 Washingtonians.

"We launched the first ever statewide LGBTQ survey across any state in the United States."

Future reports will analyze county-level experiences and health disparities across LGBTQ+ populations throughout the state.

Lomanog described projects including newsletters, storytelling initiatives focused on LGBTQ+ history, and training young people to engage with government.

"How to contact your legislators, how to know which district you're in."

They also identified stronger protections in schools as a key concern.

"We need a little bit better protection in schools."

What Adults Need to Understand

Perhaps the most insightful exchange came when Korman asked what adults should know about working with youth.

Lomanog answered frankly:

"Please just listen."

They described situations where adults unintentionally patronize young people or assume they lack knowledge.

"You can use your big words. Trust me, we understand what you're talking about."

Grossarth similarly encouraged adults to approach conversations with openness rather than preconceived assumptions.

"What they have to say is valuable, insightful."

Lomanog added a memorable piece of advice:

"Don't go in it with the mindset of gotcha."

A Message of Hope

As the webinar concluded, each panelist reflected on what meaningful youth participation can accomplish.

Fennell emphasized that government functions best when it looks like the population it serves.

"When we make state government actually look like the communities we serve, it is such a better way to run our state government."

Romero offered a concise call to action:

"Pay youth."

And Lomanog closed with a message that captured the spirit of the entire discussion:

"I hope that this panel showed other youth hope."

They continued:

"You can make a change at any age that you are, and whoever you are."

That theme resonated throughout the webinar. The Commission and Youth Advisory Council are not simply preparing young people to become future leaders. They are demonstrating that young people are leaders right now, and that their experiences, expertise, and voices belong at the center of decisions that affect their lives.

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