

YOGA SERVICE COMMUNITY RESOURCE PAPER

Yoga Service Networks: What, Where, Who, How and Why?

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Yoga Service Networks (YSNs) bring people interested in yoga service together to learn from, collaborate with, and mutually support one another. This Community Resource Paper is intended for people interested in setting up new YSNs, or developing existing ones further.

What's the difference between yoga service "networks," and yoga service programs or organizations?

The purpose of YSNs isn't to teach yoga, but rather to connect people, programs, and organizations interested or involved in yoga service with each other. YSNs help build and uplift the field of yoga service through sharing knowledge, facilitating relationships, creating community and more. They do not, however, offer yoga instruction on a regular basis.

What's the relationship between YSNs and the Yoga Service Council (YSC)?

The YSC is committed to supporting the development of YSNs. However, it has no legal or financial connection with them, either individually or collectively. YSNs are independent organizations: self-generated, self-governing, and self-sustaining.

Where can YSNs be developed?

YSNs are intended to foster connection among people living in a common geographically defined area, such as a city, region, or small town. They can be developed anywhere there are a sufficient number of people interested to make it worthwhile.

Do any YSNs already exist?

Yes. Chicago's Socially Engaged Yoga Network (SEYN) was established in 2013, the Rochester Yoga Service Network (RYSN) in 2014, and the Atlanta Regional Yoga Service Network in 2015. These YSNs are well-known to the YSC as each was co-founded by a Board member or Advisor. Others may exist that we are unaware of.

How do you set up a YSN?

There is no one "right way" to set up a YSN. What works best will vary depending on who is involved, what resources are available, and what the driving concerns of the nascent network may be. That said, the following steps have been found helpful:

1. *Create a core group of 2-4 committed organizers.*

Developing a YSN requires a core group of people who share a common vision, are inspired to take action, and have resources to work toward it. Realistically, this means being able to commit time on a volunteer basis.

Having several people involved in the leadership team provides the camaraderie and support necessary to make this work sustainable and enjoyable. It makes it easier to tap into different, but complementary social networks. It also models the process of developing collaborative relationships dedicated to strengthening the local yoga service community.

The number of leaders interested and available will, of course, vary. As a general rule, it's good to have at least one partner to work with. Conversely, having more than four people involved tends to make the planning process unnecessarily complex, time-consuming, and unwieldy.

2. *Work with your leadership team to choose a name, draft mission and vision statements, compile a list of people to invite to a kick-off meeting, and brainstorm about program structure and content.*

Hold a series of 2-4 leadership meetings before organizing a public event. This provides the time necessary to strengthen relationships, exchange ideas, and draft material to present at your first public meeting.

People who come to your event will want to know what your vision is, how they might contribute, and why they might want to invest time in doing so. Generating a shared feeling of excitement, camaraderie, and purpose at your first meeting will give your fledgling YSN momentum by inspiring people to spread the word, and keep coming back. Therefore, it's important to invest time upfront, and come prepared.

3. *Find a meeting space (or rotating set of spaces) that is safe, pleasant, accessible, food-friendly, culturally inclusive, and available free of charge.*

Be mindful about choosing a location that supports diversity and facilitates inclusivity as much as possible. Neighborhood safety and accessibility are also important.

Having meetings that include healthy snacks or a potluck meal works well in terms of scheduling (e.g., enabling people to come to a three-hour meeting on

a Friday after work) and camaraderie (eating together is fun, and socially bonding). This means, however, finding a location that allows food and drink, and requiring several people to stay late enough to ensure proper cleanup.

Meetings spaces that can work well include 1) people's homes, 2) yoga studios, and 3) colleges and universities.

Meeting in people's homes is a nice option for fledgling YSNs, which will most likely have relatively small gatherings that bring together people from various pre-existing social networks. Once a YSN becomes big enough to have a public presence and attract sizeable numbers, however, it's best to hold meetings in studios or other public locations.

Often, studio owners are willing to host YSN meetings free of charge, at least on a rotating, occasional basis. Meeting in different studios can be a great way of bringing people who are normally clustered in different parts of the yoga community together.

Meeting at a college or university is generally only feasible when a partnership with a college-based yoga service program exists. The Rochester Yoga Service Network, for example, coordinates meetings and events regularly with the Nazareth College yoga service program, and is able to hold meetings on campus free of charge. Nascent YSNs may wish to explore whether there is a local college or university they could develop a relationship with. In addition to providing meeting space, such partnerships produce important synergies between colleges and communities, students and non-students, younger and older adults, and so on, and are often well worth developing if possible.

YSN meetings do not have to be held in the same location every time. There are pros and cons to changing locations. On the one hand, it's nice to have an established routine in a familiar place. On the other, different locations are more or less comfortable and accessible to different people. In either case, finding a space that can be utilized free of charge is vital.

4. *Organize an introductory community meeting, or series of meetings.*

While the length of time allotted for a meeting may vary, three hours is usually a good bet.

This allows sufficient time both for in-depth introductions, a substantive program, and informal socializing and networking.

Again, there is no “right way” to organize a YSN kick-off meeting. Components that have been found to work well, however, include:

- opening with a short centering (meditative and grounding) exercise;
- presenting a simple agenda;
- introducing the basic idea of the YSN, along with the leadership team;
- sharing sufficiently in-depth introductions to have a sense of who is in the room and why (e.g., not simply names, but also relevant work, interests, and expertise – or, perhaps, an inspiring yoga service “moment”);
- presenting your draft mission and vision statements, along with ideas about program structure and content;
- facilitating a robust discussion of these proposals, inviting feedback, new ideas, and constructive critique;
- structuring in a break in which people can get food, if that’s part of the program; and
- allowing at least 15 minutes before the meeting officially closes for informal socializing and networking.

5. Decide on how frequently you wish to meet over the next year (quarterly or tri-annually is recommended to start). Begin setting up the date, time, location, and content for your next meeting ASAP.

After your kick-off meeting, develop a basic game plan for the coming year. One key question is: how frequently do you wish to meet? Be realistic in setting your goal. Having meetings too frequently may be unsustainable and cause burnout. Conversely, it’s probably necessary to meet at least three times a year to establish some sense of cohesion and momentum.

If you feel that you’re ready to plan the substantive focus of each meeting for the coming year, great. If not, don’t worry about it. Simply start planning the next one. Ideally, it will be clear which direction to go

in based on whatever generated the most interest and enthusiasm at your kick-off.

6. Build an email list, preferably using a free, professional-quality newsletter platform. Start developing a centralized email list of people interested in your work at the time of your initial leadership meeting. If possible, input information directly into a professional-quality newsletter platform that allows you to build a sizeable email list before incurring fees, such as Mailchimp. If this seems too technically demanding, no worries; you can always compile the list elsewhere and import it into one later.

Make sure that everyone who comes to every meeting is entered into your database. Ideally, this can be done by participants while the meeting is in progress by passing around an iPad, or sending a Google doc link to people’s mobile phones. If that’s too difficult, simply have everyone sign in on a written list, and have someone from the leadership team input that info later.

7. Decide how to handle announcements and communications. The advantage of having your email list on a platform such as Mailchimp is that you can easily generate professional-looking email invitations, announcements, and newsletters, and send them at no cost. Of course, to maintain the integrity and reputation of your YSN, it’s critical not to send too many mailings, make it easy everyone to unsubscribe, and refrain from sharing your list with others.

If working with such a platform is too difficult, another alternative would be to send out standard emails, preferably from a dedicated account that has been set up for that purpose.

8. Set up simple, inexpensive social media hubs to publicize your network (website, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) Ideally, your YSN can establish a robust social media presence that will extend your influence far beyond the parameters of your city. It should be possible to do this at low to no cost.

Platforms such as Wordpress.org offer free, user-friendly templates for websites. Facebook Pages and Groups are free, and can be set up by anyone with a personal account. Facebook event invitations are also a good way to publicize and invite people to a specific event.

Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and other platforms are also free, and a wonderful means of connecting with others and sharing your work with the world.

For safety reasons, be careful not to put personal information, such as individual email addresses, online. If your meetings are held at a private home, set up an alternative RSVP system if possible, rather than posting the address publicly.

If it's OK with those present at your meetings, take photos and post the best ones on social media. Generally speaking, this is fun for those who attended, and gives others a sense of what being there was like.

Blogs are typically too time-intensive for a YSN to maintain. YSN members interested in blogging about their experiences are encouraged to submit material to the Yoga Service Council blog if interested (contact blog@yogaservicecouncil.org).

Substantively, what types of structures and topics work well for YSN meetings?

Your kick-off meeting should reveal some pre-existing group interests, such as teaching yoga in schools, trauma-informed yoga, etc. Members of your leadership circle may also have particular topics they'd like to focus on.

Formats and topics that have worked well in the past include:

1. Presentations and Panel Discussions

One structure that can work well for a three-hour meeting is to have three people with complementary expertise on a particular topic each give individual 20-minute presentations (1 hour total), followed by an open Q & A period (another 45-60 minutes). Another option is to have a facilitated panel discussion followed by Q & A. Specific topics that have worked well with this format include:

- Integrating Yoga Into Mental Health Care. Three mental health professionals who are also yoga teachers made complementary, non-redundant presentations on different aspects of their work.
- Teaching Yoga and Mindfulness to Youth. In this case, one presenter worked with youth in public schools, one served in a community organization, and one integrated teaching yoga with non-

violent communication techniques.

- Yoga on the Inside. This meeting focused on teaching yoga in prisons, jails, and juvenile detention. This meeting included an intro to the state of the U.S. criminal justice system, moderated panel discussion, Q & A, and networking, eating, and socializing.

In each of these cases, presenters were happy to volunteer their time. Presenting at a YSN meeting gave them an opportunity to learn from their peers, engage in discussion with members of their community, and network with others interested in their work. Presenters were also featured in the YSN newsletter announcing the meeting, as well as on social media before and after the event.

2. Hosting a Major Speaker

Another option is to feature a single speaker, such as a well-known author, teacher, activist, etc. This might be someone who lives in the area, or who is visiting and could work an additional event into his or her schedule. Most likely, this structure would require paying some sort of honorarium.

YSN leaders should be careful to structure their meetings to be as inclusive as possible. Practically speaking, this means working only with people willing to present for a relatively modest fee, and offering some sort of discounted rate, sliding scale, or donation option. In keeping with the ethos of yoga service, no one should be unable to attend a YSN event due to lack of funds.

3. Yoga Service Trainings

Another option is to have YSNs organize short (3-4 hour) training on topics of interest to their local yoga service community, such as teaching trauma-informed yoga, or integrating volunteers who are not certified yoga teachers into yoga service work.

In this case, trainers might be paid or volunteer their time, depending on circumstances. Again, however, keeping the trainings as maximally inclusive as possible should be a priority. Also, it is important to have trainings that complement, rather than compete with the offerings of local yoga teachers and studios to help ensure positive relationships with the community.

4. Yoga Service Fundraisers

YSNs have organized special events dedicated to raising money for a yoga service related organization or cause. Again, organizers should be mindful not to inadvertently set up situations that might create competition or otherwise cause bad feeling within the local yoga community.

5. Book Discussion Group

YSNs have organized single-session book discussion groups to allow members to engage in a collaborative project of learning, discussion, and reflection on works that are particularly important to them.

6. Yoga Service Council Tie-Ins

YSNs have dedicated time to sharing general information about the YSC, as well as knowledge gained from attending the annual Yoga Service Conference. YSNs may also wish to organize meetings around YSC-developed resources, such as the Best Practices Book Series, or other Community Resource Papers.

What are other ways in which YSNs support their local yoga service community?

YSNs can also support their local yoga service community through social media and web-based initiatives such as helping to publicize local yoga service organizations, trainings, and other events; providing information about volunteer needs or staff openings at local yoga service organizations; and enabling discussion and information sharing among YSN members. Free platforms such as Facebook and Google groups can be utilized, as well as a dedicated YSN website, if it's possible to develop one.

Should YSNs incorporate as 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations?

Most YSNs shouldn't need to bother with any sort of formal incorporation. Ideally, the organization should be simple enough that it's easy to run with a small group of committed volunteers, supplemented by a rotating set of speakers, presenters, and hosts. Unless it grows to the point where it's ready, willing, and able to tackle ambitious events (e.g., a weekend conference), it's advisable to run it on a volunteer/donation basis, with no money changing hands.

How will the YSC support YSNs? Currently, our initiatives include:

- Developing a dedicated page on our website that

offers short descriptions of existing YSNs, along with appropriate links and contact info.

- Offering free conference calls for those interested or involved in leading YSNs, facilitated by knowledgeable YSC Board members and Advisors.
- Providing books in our Best Practices series to YSNs that organize meetings on relevant topics (e.g., yoga in schools) to organizers free of charge, and to meeting attendees at reduced cost.
- Continuing to develop Community Resource Papers that will support YSNs and serve as meeting resources, and make them freely available on our website.
- Featuring YSN leaders and members on the YSC blog and podcast, given mutual interest and availability.
- Posting YSN events for free on our Event Calendar, which lists yoga service trainings, workshops, and events throughout the U.S. and internationally.

The YSC welcomes suggestions regarding how we might best support YSNs. Please email any questions, comments, and ideas to us at info@yogaservicecouncil.org.

This paper is part of a series of Community Resource Papers published by the Yoga Service Council, dedicated to maximizing the effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of individuals and organizations working to make yoga and mindfulness practices equally accessible to all.

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