TIP SHEET: UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION IN VIRTUAL PROGRAMMING

The abrupt transition to virtual programming at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic upended the ways that youth programs typically track, analyze, and report youth participation in programming. This tip sheet summarizes some considerations for understanding participation in virtual (or hybrid) programming.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO "ATTEND" ONLINE?

This might seem like a simple question, but virtual programming can take many forms. For an online program that is live and group-based, attendance might mean logging onto the meeting platform or participating in a round of introductions. For programs that engage participants in other ways – through video or independent activities – a young person may be able to attend by viewing a video or engaging with others on social media.

HOW CAN YOUNG PEOPLE BEST EXPERIENCE PROGRAM BENEFITS?

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, attendance typically meant physical presence in programming. Further, many accountability systems were built on the assumption that physical presence was an indicator of engagement, and that more was better. But is more time on an online platform the best way to experience the benefits of your program? If not, you might want to consider different indicators of engagement, such as the completion of work or contact with program staff.

WHAT IS MEANINGFUL TO TRACK FOR PROGRAM PLANNING AND EVALUATION?

Given the different ways that your program engages young people online, it can be difficult to determine what would be most meaningful to track. It may be that average daily attendance – a common measure for in-person programs – is still a valid measure of your work online. In this case, you may be able to rely on the attendance data collected by your meeting platform to represent engagement. Other options include:

- Using **an icebreaker activity** to "take roll" in a group-based program
- Have participants fill out **an online form** to document attendance
- Have young people **answer a question or submit work** in order to demonstrate their engagement in programming that may or may not be "live"
- Have staff **document the interactions** they have with young people or families
- For some programs, it may make sense to use a **learning management system** to understand whether and to what extent young people are accessing program content

When deciding how you will capture attendance, it is important to remain open to the myriad ways young people may choose to engage, and remain flexible!