

Blooming Collaborative – planting the seeds for tomorrow

What is Blooming Collaborative?

Blooming Collaborative is a leadership program sponsored by the Ford Foundation where up to 20 youth with disabilities participate in virtual sessions to complete the leadership training. During these sessions, the participants will learn how to be leaders in their communities, how to engage with their local CILs and disability advocacy organizations, as well as developing communication skills, coping skills, and learning about making meaningful connections.

Program length: 8 weeks

Meeting length: Each session/meeting will last 1-1.5 hours.

Location: Zoom

Time: 6:00 PM CT

Networking space: 15 min before meeting and 15 min after.

More information: In 8 weeks, we will learn and talk about important topics regarding disability, advocacy, and being a leader. The topics will be facilitated by youth with disabilities, professionals, and CIL staff with experience relevant to the topics of conversation. There will also be room for peer support opportunities, so youth can learn and connect with multiple people and form stronger bonds. Ideally, we will all meet at the conference and continue to network.

After the 8 weeks, participants will be eligible to apply for a scholarship to attend our annual APRIL conference in Niagara Falls, NY. In this conference they will meet people with disabilities both youth and adults of all ages, and have the opportunity to have wider discussions about disability, advocacy, and form in person bonds, friendships, and networks as they so choose.

If you need assistance, please reach out to our Coordinator of Youth Services Genesis G Lezama (She/Her) gglezama@april-rural.org.

Read what past participants have to say about their experiences with "Lead On" - Blooming Collaborative is our new name!

- "I refined my future career goals in this program. I gained a lot of new resources that I plan to add to my career tool belt. I learned a lot about methods of communication in this collaborative and I saw my interpersonal skills grow."
- "I feel like I have grown as a leader more by being able to make connections to others that have given me different views of the disability world."

- "Desde que estuve en el programa entendí que puedo ser capaz de hacer muchas cosas para la comunidad y que debemos compartir nuestras experiencias para que todos nos podamos entender y ayudarnos. También podremos servir de inspiración para las futuras generaciones. " (Since I was in the program I understood that I can be able to do many things for the community and that we must share our experiences so that we can all understand and help each other. We can also serve as an inspiration for future generations.)

APRIL "Blooming Collaborative" Timeline:

- **Application Deadline:** Monday, July 27, 2026
- **Announcement if selected:** We will contact all elected participants on July 31
- **Zoom Meetings:** every week
- **Zoom calls will start:** Friday August 7, 2026
- **Time:** 6:00 PM – 7:30 PM Central Time
- **APRIL Conference:** October 23 - 25, 2026

Eligibility and Expectations:

- Be between the ages of 15-30
- Have a disability
- Actively participate in all 8 Zoom leadership classes - valid excuses can be accepted and must make up on a case-by-case basis.
 - Make up sessions will be 101 before the next group session.
- Attend and volunteer at the APRIL Conference in October 2026

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the APRIL Conference?

The APRIL Conference is an annual National Conference on Rural Independent Living for people with disabilities and their allies, Centers for Independent Living, Statewide Independent Living Councils, and other organizations and individuals who share rural independent living concerns. Our conference is on the forefront of providing transportation advocacy, peer to peer mentoring opportunities, staff training opportunities, highlighting best practices, youth mentoring, and much more!

What are the goals of the program?

The primary goal of the APRIL "Blooming Collaborative" is to provide youth and young adults with disabilities with a "next step" opportunity to build on the leadership skills they have learned through previous experiences such as the APRIL Youth Conference,

Youth Leadership Forums, and other similar programs. The program also seeks to make personal and professional peer connections between its participants, building a network of Disabled youth and young adults across the United States.

Who are the ideal participants in this program?

The APRIL "Blooming Collaborative" is open to people with disabilities ages 15-30, the ideal participants are those who have previous leadership and/or leadership training experience and are looking to expand those skills. Therefore, we encourage members of the Disability community who are currently part of boards, CIL staff, school organizations, or desire to be more involved in the future.

Is there a cost to participate?

The APRIL "Blooming Collaborative" is free of charge to all participants. Those who complete 100% of the training will be eligible to submit a scholarship application to attend the APRIL conference. Scholarship amounts are provided on a case by case, and we hope that your CIL or other organization is able to help cover some of the costs. Please communicate with your CIL ahead of time that in the event of being awarded with a scholarship you may need further financial support from them.

Would there be "homework?"

Yes, as journaling or other form of activity post-session. The journaling process is intended to help participants take what they learn and apply it to their daily lives and futures. Participants are encouraged to find a journaling process that works for them and allows them to best connect the material to their own experiences. For example, participants may choose to write poetry or songs, create visual art, or write journal entries in a more traditional format. Participants will be asked to share part of their journaling process with the rest of the group while in person at the APRIL Conference.

Interested in being a speaker?

Contact Genesis via email to coordinate - This is for youth leaders who are interested in teaching topics to other youth with disabilities for the **virtual** part of the "Lead On" Conference. If you're between 16-30 years old and have a passion for teaching a subject, experience in creating workshops, please apply below! Topics to choose from will include:

- Advocacy
- Intersectionality
- Employment
- Assertive Communication
- Mental health awareness

- Building Community
- Leadership skills
- Any relevant skills to leadership and advocacy

The workshop/ presentation should be at least 30 min and up to 1 hr with 15 – 30 min conversation/ discussion time.

To register and to address any questions, please contact Genesis Garcia Lezama at gglezama@april-rural.org

We hope to see you there!