How to Recruit Volunteer Host Families

Recruiting host families is one of the most essential responsibilities in your role as Local Coordinator. It is also one of the most rewarding aspects of your position as it puts you in touch with many segments of your community: civic groups, the press and radio stations, schools, religious organizations and businesses. You will gain new friends and learn new skills as you find new host families.

Students arrive in mid-August and in mid-January for year and semester programs. Recruiting host families, however, is an active and ongoing process which begins many months before students arrive, since we are always placing students!

Word-of-Mouth is Key

Although effective methods for recruitment vary from community to community, the key to locating safe and suitable host families is your own personal approach. You are offering families the opportunity to share in a warm, personal learning experience, and your approach and interaction with potential host families should reflect this. Whatever your approach, be prepared, be enthusiastic, be yourself, ask for referrals and follow up.

Use your contacts to find host families! Contacts are people who you know or who are referred to you by other people. Begin networking! Networking is “spreading the news,” promoting the program through friends, family and business and other associates. When you know people, even if somewhat formally as in business or with new acquaintances, you have a sense of what is important to them.

Identify potential host families (within a 120 mile radius) by networking with friends and family to start. It is crucial that you speak to people face to face, since word-of-mouth marketing is the number one way Local Coordinators find host families. Successful recruitment is done by contacting your local clubs and organizations, libraries, churches and promoting the program to friends, family and co-workers. It has been shown that the number one way to find host families is by word-of-mouth. The second-most successful way is by utilizing AYA’s marketing materials. Once you finish your AYA trainings, you will be provided with a link to order marketing materials online. You can also find think link on the Resources page of the LC Portal.

Tips for Getting the Word Out

- **Talk to as many people as you can in-person about the AYA program.**

- **Call the leads in your LC Portal.** These are located in the “My Territory” section. Please see the Appendix for a helpful “how-to” document.

- **Stay in contact with potential host families.** Just because a potential host family isn’t interested today doesn’t mean they won’t be interested tomorrow. A potential host family may need more information about the AYA program. They may want to discuss their capabilities, concerns and reservations about the responsibilities involved in being a good host family to an international
student. They will need your encouragement and the assurance that hosting an international student is an exciting adventure.

- **Display posters and pass out brochures.** Distribute program brochures and flyers in all local schools, churches, clubs and stores. Always obtain permission from someone in charge to hang posters and distribute program materials.

- **Make presentations.** Contact your local high school, PTA and foreign language teachers. When giving a presentation, it is often helpful to take along a member of a host family, an exchange student or a teacher or administrator from one of our host schools. Take flyers, brochures and other informative materials about the AYA program.

- **Promote AYA in newspapers, television and radio.** Always contact AYA’s National Office before doing an interview with the media.

- **Social networks.** Social networking sites (especially Facebook) may be an effective tool to develop interest amongst your contacts regarding hosting an exchange student. It is imperative to remember that postings on these sites must be professional and reflect our high standards for host families. Please be certain that no specific student information is used and avoid using terminology that conveys desperation, urgency or minimizes the high level of commitment that is expected of our host families. Our students’ safety and well-being is our primary focus, and all of our messaging should consistently convey the importance of our mission.

- **Contact area High Schools.** Reach out to high schools in your area (and surrounding) and ask if they can assist with spreading the word. See if they can put something in their newsletter, send something out to families, or see if you can attend Back to School Night and set up a table to talk to those who may be interested!

**Remember to never:**

- Under any circumstances appeal to someone’s sense of guilt. It is against Department of State federal regulations & CSIET standards. It is considered unethical and could jeopardize the future of AYA programs. You also cannot beg anyone to host.
  - Some examples of unacceptable phrases include:
    - “If the student does not get a home, he will not be able to come to America.”
    - “This student is homeless and has nowhere to go.”
    - There are more effective and ethical ways to present the program:

- It is against Department of State federal regulations & CSIET for Local Coordinators to recruit athletes for school sports teams.

- It is also against Department of State federal regulations & CSIET to make any reference to a specific student who needs a home such as:
You may refer to students in more general terms:

o "Felix, a German student, is 16 and loves music, horses, and singing. He plays in the band at his school."

Host Family Recruitment Tips

- Define your network and encourage other Local Coordinators to do the same. Who do you know collectively? What groups are you connected with? What like-minded organizations might you tap into?

- Tap into your existing AYA network – current students, returnees, past and current host families, natural families, etc.

- Order our Marketing Materials online (if you haven't already!)

- Host student placement parties with families in your neighborhood.

- Create an e-mail list of “maybe next year” families or other interested families. Invite them to attend events such as holiday parties or welcome picnics.

- Target specific types of families – families with one child, families with no children, families with children who are no longer living at home, families with similar interests, neighbors and friends of current exchange students.

- Target specific communities – cultural background groups, Peace Corps volunteers, religious organizations, and corporations.

- Keep good records of anyone who has expressed an interest in hosting, by entering their information in your LC Portal by using the "Add a New Lead" feature.

- Ask local politicians to include your current exchange students at local area benefit presentations.

- Read local papers and find out more about local organizations – identify key leaders within the organization, record their contact information and get in touch.

- Utilize small local media for feature stories, letters to the editor, etc.

- Publicly thank current host families in letters to the editor or publish student thank you notes to their communities.

- Utilize church newsletters or newsletters of other community groups or major businesses.

- Make one-on-one connections with potential families.

- Be a speaker or bring a student to speak at events, luncheons, etc.
• Keep in mind the needs of the community; AYA students might be able to volunteer for another organization.

• Make presentations to students in classes or clubs – presentations to schools

• Go to PTA meetings, school diversity councils, and international nights to discuss hosting.

• Ask the yearbook/school newspaper staff to do a feature on current exchange students in their school.

• Visit websites to find contacts within organizations, schools, newsletters, and media.

• Build awareness with AYA marketing materials!

• Have informational booths at local events, parades, festivals, college fairs, etc.

• Bring awareness to schools with younger students – middle schools are especially good for presentations.

• Provide excellent support for high schools – schools appreciate, reward and assist exchange organizations that support their students.

• Attend local Boy Scout or Girl Scout meetings.

• Ask families who have children that have studied abroad to host or recommend others.

• Ask a current or former host family to write a testimonial letter for a local paper, or go with you to speak to a civic group.

• Utilize your social networks; Facebook, Linked In, Twitter, etc.

• Always talk about hosting/AYA; word of mouth is the most widespread way to recruit host families.

What to Look for in a Host Family

Host families are as varied as the students they invite to live with them. Current host families include:

• young couples

• retirees

• single parents raising teenage (or younger) children

• same sex couples

• couples whose children have left home

• single people with no children (a presentation must be made by the Placement Specialist to the overseas partners to seek student approval before the placement is made)
Host families must:

- provide a student with a safe and suitable home for the academic year or semester.
- provide a student with his/her own bed and a place to study; either in a room he/she shares with one family member of the same gender and within four years of a student’s age or his own room.
- provide a student with all meals.
- provide transportation to and from school (usually by school bus).
- be financially stable; not receiving financial needs-based government subsidies for food or housing.
- be at least 25 years old, and one parent must be working (unless both potential host parents are retired).
- be willing to participate in monthly contacts, and home visits by the Local Coordinator and/or other AYA representatives.
- welcome a student as a member of the family and encourage students to participate in all aspects of family life.
- encourage the exchange of ideas and provide students with exposure to the cultural and social environment of the home and neighborhood.
- provide the love and understanding a young person needs to enjoy a successful academic year in America.

AYA students should be accepted as full members of a host family, with all the privileges and responsibilities which children of the host family have. The Local Coordinator must ensure that the family and home will be a safe and suitable environment for the student.

FAQ’s by Potential Host Families

Is AYA a non-profit organization?

AYA is a non-profit organization. This means that we are a 501(c)(3) organization, recognized by the Internal Revenue Service.

Will I get paid to host a student?

It is a Department of State regulation that AYA host families/individuals are not paid or incentivized to host. All AYA families volunteer to host a student/s.

What kind of visa do the students receive?

The students receive a J-1 exchange visitor visa. AYA issues a DS-2019 that secures a J-1 exchange student visa.
How do I get accepted as a host family?

After you agree to host, you will complete a Host Family Application online, which includes a criminal background check release form. Along with the application we ask that you provide two references. You will also have an in-home interview.

What are my primary responsibilities as a host family?

- Providing a student with a safe, supportive and loving home for the academic year or semester.
- Welcoming a student as a member of the family and encouraging students to participate in all aspects of family life.
- Providing a student with his/her own bed and a place to study, either in a room shared with a family member of the same sex and within four years of the student’s age, or in his/her own room.
- Providing a student with meals, except school lunches (host families must provide lunches for grant students).
- Providing transportation to and from school (usually by school bus).
- Encouraging the exchange of ideas and providing students with exposure to the cultural and social environment of the home and neighborhood.
- Providing the love and understanding a young person needs to enjoy a successful academic year in America.

What ages are the students, and from what countries do the students come?

The students range in age from 15 to 18 years old. These students come from about 50 countries. Some include: Brazil, Chile, China, Egypt, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, and many others.

How many students does AYA place per year?

We place anywhere from about 500-600 per year.

Do I get to choose my student?

Yes, you can choose your student from many different countries and profiles. You have the choice of hosting a boy or girl. You can choose your student based on different hobbies, interests, and much more!

Does the student have insurance?

Yes, students have medical and accidental insurance through AYA or their sponsoring agency. Students receive an insurance card and a brochure detailing the policy coverage when they arrive in the U.S.

Will my student come with his/her own spending money?
Students are expected to have their own spending money for personal expenses (school lunches, supplies, clothes, entertainment).

**Are students allowed to drive?**

Students are not permitted to drive any motor vehicle (including motorcycles, mopeds and cars) except during the course of an accredited driver education class. Students may enroll in a school-sponsored driver education class if their host and natural parents permit it. AYA does not guarantee any student that he or she will have the opportunity to get a driver’s license.

*Note: It is becoming increasingly difficult in most states for foreign students to obtain a driver’s license. Check with the Department of Motor Vehicles in your state for the official regulations. Students will incur all cost.*

**How will my student get to and from school?**

Your student may walk, be driven to school by a family member or a friend with a driver’s license, or take the bus.

**When can I expect my student to arrive?**

Students arrive in August/ early September for fall placements and in January for spring placements. Most students first attend an AYA-sponsored orientation and then fly from the orientation site to their host communities. Host families and Local Coordinators receive detailed flight information as soon as it is available.

**When does my student have to leave?**

Students have open-ended return tickets. They book their own flights home with guidance from the national office and help from their Local Coordinators. Students must return home within two weeks after the last day of school or no later than June 30. This is required by the terms of their visa.

**Will I, as the host family, be in contact with my Local Coordinator throughout the year?**

Yes, you are encouraged to call your Local Coordinator anytime with any questions or concerns you may have. The Local Coordinator is required by AYA to be in monthly contact with the host family and student. The Local Coordinator is also required to submit monthly reports on each student he/she is supervising. Many Local Coordinators set up student and host family events throughout the year in order to stay in touch. Your home will be visited once per semester by the Local Coordinator, and once or more by the Second Visitor, within the first 60 days of the student’s arrival (or within 30 days of the student’s arrival if you are welcoming the student for 4-6 weeks).

**What happens if the placement doesn’t work out?**

The Local Coordinator will work with a host family and student to try to resolve miscommunications, unrealistic expectations or cultural misunderstandings. Most of the time, misunderstandings can be resolved with the help of an objective mediator. If the Local Coordinator, in combination with the AYA National Office, determines that things cannot be resolved, he/she will place the student with another host family (within the same school district when possible).
What happens if my student has behavioral or academic problems during his/her stay in my house?

If any problem should arise, the Local Coordinator will step in and work with the student and family to determine what action is necessary. The students have strict rules about behavior and academics. They have signed a contract promising to abide by the rules.

Promoting the Benefits of Hosting

Here are some very popular reasons for you to share with prospective families:

- Interested in other cultures
- Enjoy spending time with teenagers
- Desire to share American culture
- Enjoy the exchange of ideas and perspectives
- Promote peace/global understanding
- Provide diversity to school and community
- Helping your children to become globally aware
- Gain first-hand knowledge of ancestral country
- Past international experience (Peace Corps, military, travel)
- Giving others an inside view of America
- A rewarding intercultural learning experience in their own home
- The opportunity to choose a carefully screened student who will best match their family
- The ability to claim charitable deductions for hosting AYA students. If you pay for the costs of a student who lives in your home, you may qualify for a tax deduction for each school month on your tax return
- Limited financial obligation – host families provide students with a home, bed, meals and support from the AYA National Office and Local Coordinator. AYA students bring money for their own expenses and school lunches. They also have full medical insurance.

The following are some more specialized arguments in favor of hosting. These are selected from the collective experience of coordinators working with more specific populations.

In Time of National Conflict:

Given the events of September 11, 2001, and today’s current events, there have been many people who have wondered how they can help. Hosting is probably the most meaningful way for an ordinary family
to contribute. It is much more personal and effective than putting a check in the mail, and you can live in even the smallest town and still make a difference. Getting to know a student of another culture can heal wounds and keep negative stereotypes from taking root.

**How to Respond if Someone Says “No”**

Hosting an exchange student is an idea that many families may have never considered. This is why determination and persistence are so important to Local Coordinators. Even more important, however, is the ability to listen for possible objections and to be able to give positive answers. Some concerns are simply based on lack of knowledge about the program. Here are some examples that may be helpful:

**“We don’t like the idea of a stranger in our home”**

- After a few days, your student will not be a stranger. I know it sounds like a scary thing, but I can put you in touch with some former host families so you can hear about their experiences.

**“We don’t do much in our family”**

- Students join our program because they want to become part of a regular American family and high school. A willingness to let them become a member of your family is all that is required.

**“We don’t have enough time to do activities with students. He or she would be bored in our home”**

- Students do not have to be constantly entertained, and they are encouraged by our program to get involved in school and in the community.

**“It’s too expensive”**

- Our students come with personal spending money and insurance.

**“I don’t have an extra room”**

- Students can share a room with one family member of the same gender with no more than four years age difference.

**“A 10 month commitment is too much for our family”**

- We also have short term opportunities. Would you consider being a Temporary Arrival Family allowing the student to live with you for up to 6 weeks? Perhaps you’d consider hosting a semester student for just five months? We are also looking for potential temporary families to step in if a family is suddenly unable to host.

**“Our family really can’t do it. Now is not a good time.”**

- I understand and appreciate your honesty. Perhaps you know other families who would enjoy this wonderful opportunity. We do offer referral incentives.

**“Our children are young. We don't have any teenagers”**
I understand your concern. However, we have found placing foreign teenagers with younger siblings to be very successful. Think of how much fun it could be for your children to have an older brother or sister and start learning about new cultures at a young age.

“We are senior citizens and we have no children in our home”

That is not a problem at all. Our students will love the undivided attention. We have had seniors that say hosting makes them feel young again and that the student’s activity brings new excitement to their home.