

Listening Session Summary: Focus on Improving Outcomes for all Youth

Location: Washington, DC

Date: December 2, 2010

Approach

The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP) hosted a series of listening sessions across the country to gather input from stakeholders to inform the development of an overarching strategic plan for federal youth policy. In order to go in depth on specific issues, each listening session had a special focus topic, such as juvenile justice, housing, positive youth development, and others. Sessions lasted approximately four hours and were led by an experienced facilitator.

Participants

See Appendix A for participant information.

Questions and Responses

Summaries of participants' responses follow each of the questions below.

What is the single most important thing we could do to make a difference in the lives of youth, related to improving outcomes for all youth?

- A meaningful, positive relationship with a **caring and consistent adult**.
- Consistency and stability across areas of their lives (e.g., education, family).
- A good **education**.
- Comprehensive services, supports, and opportunities in a **structured environment**.
- A **safety net** that helps make it easier for young people to access services without an adult.
- **Active involvement** in planning regarding issues that affect them.
- Youth **empowerment** through youth leadership, service learning, and having their voices heard.
- **Opportunities** for education, employment experience, internships, and to build life skills.
- They believe that it is possible for them to be successful.
- Access to services that do not "pathologize" the young person.
- Core **values** (e.g., work ethic, positive attitude, integrity, respect, responsibility).
- **Family engagement** in programming to support youth.
- A broad definition of "family".
- Keeping young people out of the juvenile justice system for non-serious offenses.

What programs really make a difference in the lives of youth? How do you know this?

- Programs that provide **length, breadth, depth, and continuity of support** (because sometimes partial or inconsistent support does more harm than good).
- Programs that **measure the quality** of the services they provide.
- Programs that use **strengths-based** approaches.
- Programs designed to **meet the needs of the individual** young person (e.g., non-traditional educational support programs with flexible hours).
- Programs that meet young people's needs **within their own neighborhoods**.
- Programs that **support providers** to maintain ongoing, transformative relationships with youth.
- Programs that build upon the capabilities of other programs to collaborate and improve services.

- Professional development programs that help adults working with youth to **model desired behaviors**.
- **Mentoring** programs for young people.

Educational programs

- Programs that help youth complete a high school **education**.
- Programs to develop a **positive school climate**.
- Programs that **keep young people in school** (e.g., truancy prevention, drop-out prevention).
- **Academic readiness** programs that develop students' critical thinking skills.
- **Academic support** programs that help young people complete higher education through apprenticeships, scholarships, life skills education, case management, and other supports
- Preschools.

Family programs

- Programs that engage the entire family (with a broad definition of "family").
- Programs that provide **family-centered** treatment.
- Intensive community-based, in-home services to **keep families intact** and stabilized.

Youth development programs

- Programs that help young people become **role models** for peers and family members.
- Youth-directed, youth-informed **service learning** (especially in their own neighborhoods).
- Programs focused on **social and emotional learning** and character development.
- **Violence prevention** programs.
- Programs whose staff convey a **positive attitude toward youth** and provide caring, support, and encouragement that youth do not get at home (e.g., YouthBuild Public Charter School).
- Programs that support youth in an area of interest to them (e.g., arts, academics, sports).

What are the barriers to collaborating on youth outcomes, and how can these barriers be removed?

Barriers to collaboration

- There is a focus on programs rather than reform.
- There is **too much competition** for funding and other resources (e.g., volunteers).
- Funding is restrictive, or service providers assume it is restrictive, limiting scope of services.
- There is a **lack of political leadership** regarding youth issues.
- There is a **lack of a shared vision, goals, metrics, desired outcomes, and age criteria** for youth.
- Small non-profits can have **insufficient staff and information** to reach out and collaborate.
- There are barriers or perceived policy **barriers to sharing information** across agencies.
- A **comprehensive approach** is needed to addressing youth issues at the community level.
- Service providers are not properly trained to meet the diverse needs of youth of different ages.

How to remove barriers to collaboration

- Develop a **shared definition of the goals** of the collaboration, and how partners will interact.
- Collaborate with a **focus on helping others** rather than a focus on what your agency will get.
- Add **planning and collaborative partnership development** to the initial work plan.
- Spend time in the **project planning phase** getting to know potential partners.
- **Engage policymakers** as program advocates.
- Provide **funding guidance** to grantees.
- Develop a systematic process for agencies to **share up-to-date information** regarding clients.
- Provide **long-term funding** so that programs can achieve meaningful results.
- Incorporate **monitoring and evaluation** into program design.

- Focus more on **efficiency of programming** (costs/benefits).
- Share knowledge and **information regarding program impacts** (or lack thereof).
- Develop schools as multi-service community centers.

What can federal agencies do to assist? What are your ideas for federal policy to improve the coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency of programs affecting youth?

Federal policies and actions

- Federal youth policy should **frame and specify desired outcomes** for youth.
- Senior policymakers should **focus more on underlying causes of problems** versus just symptoms.
- The federal government should engage in a **cooperative effort across agencies** to provide a continuum of care or services linked to desired outcomes.
- Policies and information are useless without resources for implementation.
- Federal funds for youth programs are inadequate.
- Funders and policymakers should **spend time at programs** and meet service providers.
- Federal agencies should take part in discussing **non-discrimination policies** in regard to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.
- Federal agencies and federal partners should be more inclusive and **engaged with the private sector** so that funding is more integrated and manageable for grantees.
- Agencies engaged in collaborative efforts should have a mechanism to **communicate successes** to policymakers.

Funding

- Funders should allow **greater flexibility in combining grants** from multiple federal agencies.
- Funders should make the RFP process more **fair and transparent**.
- Funders and service providers must be willing to **develop new strategies** to serve young people.
- Funding applicants should have a **longer turnaround time** for proposals so they have time to establish collaborative relationships and propose a better quality of programming.
- Funders should better **inform grantees what results they need** to show to get funding extended.
- RFPs that encourage innovation should be **flexible** about the evidence base needed for funding.
- Funders should be clear in RFPs regarding who is meant by “marginalized populations.”
- More investment is needed in **leadership development** for agency youth, staff, and directors.
- There should be more intentional funding of **monitoring and evaluation**.
- RFPs should incorporate **social and emotional learning outcomes** where feasible.

Other recommendations

- Schools should **act as multi-service community centers** that are open extended hours.
- Grantees should **share information regarding completed projects** to help other agencies learn from them.
- Programming needs to focus on **sustained, comprehensive supports** for young people throughout development.
- Desired outcomes should be well aligned with program goals.
- Websites regarding services must be user friendly.
- Funding and programming should **encourage volunteerism**.

What are the best ways to reach youth who are not involved in program like yours?

- Ask program participants to **reach out to peers**.
- Involve **youth as advisors** on how to reach other youth.

- **Bring the programs to the young people** rather than expecting them to find programs.
- Explicitly **ask young people to participate**.
- Increase **funding** for youth.
- Increase the use of **schools as community resource centers**.
- Increase program **flexibility** with regard to when and how they reach and engage with youth.
- **Follow through** with youth who have accessed services to learn if their needs were met.
- Ensure that programming for youth is **consistent and structured**, because loss or discontinuity of support can leave youth worse off than they were before.
- Provide **program staff that listens** to the young person, does not judge them, and shows caring.
- Provide youth spaces that are **physically and emotionally safe**.
- Use the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** for a good set of values regarding youth.
- **Give service providers easier access to information** regarding other resources that are available.
- Give agencies training/technical assistance to improve **youth engagement** on advisory boards.
- Treat **youth involved in leadership roles** (e.g., advisory boards) the same as adults in those positions (e.g., compensation, transportation).

What are the best ways to engage youth in this process?

- **Ask service providers to identify youth** who would be available to answer questions or provide information to policymakers to improve the system.
- Ask youth who were previously involved in programming to give **feedback** to providers.
- Ask youth what would motivate them to participate—what incentives would be helpful.
- Use **social rewards** for participation (e.g., letter or call to school or home, recommendation).
- **Respond to youth** who have provided advice or information on an issue.
- Be **flexible** regarding scheduling and attendance, and offer needed supports (e.g., child care).
- Be **sensitive** to the fact that not all young people feel comfortable speaking up in front of peers.

What types of initiatives could promote collaboration and improve outcomes for youth?

- All youth should “age out” of care systems at 21 or older (varies across states, age 18 in many).
- Other social organizations (e.g., religious groups, nonprofits) should do more to support youth.

Do specific populations of youth have disproportionately poor outcomes related to the topics we have addressed? What are some ways to best serve these populations?

Populations with disproportionately poor outcomes

- Youth with disabilities
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth
- Homeless youth (they **fall through the cracks** in support systems designed for adults or families)

Best ways to serve these populations

- Youth with **disabilities** benefit from learning about their rights and responsibilities, and how to advocate for themselves.
- **Disconnected youth** (e.g., those exiting foster care or juvenile justice) need long-term support.
- Youth with a **history of abuse or neglect** need ongoing collaborative support across systems.
- Youth at risk for poorer outcomes need more comprehensive sex education.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS from Region III (Washington, DC)

Participating organizations*:

- Drexel University
- Department of Labor
- FirstPic, Inc. Consulting
- District of Columbia Child and Family Services Area
- Casey Family Programs
- Forum for Youth Investment
- radKIDS, Inc.
- Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development
- Darkness to Light
- High Tea Society for Girls
- Kid Power, Inc.
- Development Services Group, Inc.
- Higher Achievement
- Fox Valley Technical College
- National Youth Employment Coalition
- Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States
- Making Cents International
- United States Soccer Foundation
- Camp Fire USA
- Healthy Families Thriving Communities Collaborative Council
- Advocates for Youth
- College Opportunities Resources for Education
- National Network for Youth
- Institute for Family Centered Services
- Georgetown's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform
- Nicholson Foundation
- Character Education Partnership
- National Alliance to End Homelessness
- National Drug Counterdrug Program
- Center for Health and Health Care in Schools
- YouthBuild Public Charter School
- Child Welfare League of America
- National Organizations for Youth Safety
- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority
- MENTOR National Mentoring Partnership
- Family and Youth Services Bureau
- Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau
- Administration for Children and Families
- City of Norfolk, City Manager's Office (Community Empowerment)
- Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority

- ICF International
- National Children's Alliance
- Operation Safe Kids
- First Focus
- Stoneleigh Foundation

**Note: Participant information is only provided for participants who registered for the session and may not represent all organizations that were present.*