

TIPS

For Working with Youth in Community Development Projects

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**For Working with Youth
in Community Development Projects**

**Office of Alcohol, Drugs and Dependency Issues
Health Canada**

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As part of Phase II of Canada's Drug Strategy, Health Canada undertook a number of initiatives to address the needs of youth who live in high-risk conditions. Youth-at-risk can include youth having trouble with the law, youth who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out, those having problems with alcohol and/or other drug use, those experiencing depression or having thoughts of suicide, victims of abuse, those living on the street or involved with street life, those with HIV/AIDS or at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS through injection drug use or involvement in the sex trade, and other youth defined by the community and themselves as being at risk.

In 1993, a series of workshops was organized across Canada for federal government employees, service providers and youth to provide information on issues and program strategies from across North America to address issues affecting youth-at-risk, and to get communities working on forming adult/youth partnerships to identify and address local problems.

Nineteen community groups, including service providers and youth, were formed out of the workshops, which were held in Northern Ontario, Alberta and Manitoba. These groups were given some basic community-planning skills and were encouraged to continue their planning and partnership building once they returned to their own communities.

Of the 19 groups formed, 13 stayed together for a year or longer. All of the groups were made up of both youth and adults. Three types of activities came out of these groups:

- ✓ to build better youth/service provider networks in the community,
- ✓ to develop community education and awareness programs on youth issues, and
- ✓ to improve individual youth agencies or service system delivery.

In January 1994, all of the 165 youth and adult participants at the original workshops were sent a questionnaire asking them for their opinions about the effectiveness of the workshops and the follow-up work done at the community level. Interviews were also conducted with 19 service providers and Health Canada staff and 17 youth involved in the original workshops. These "tips" for working with at-risk youth in community development activities

- ▶ Both youth and adults should be involved early so that they can learn by going through the stages of group development together. Adults should never meet first without youth present to set the terms of reference and/or parameters of the project.
- ▶ Long distances between group members or project sites can make starting a solid project difficult. The project goals and methods of reaching those goals will have to change to take these distances into consideration.
- ▶ Prior to initiating projects, a thorough community analysis should take place, including an assessment of the issues and inventory of existing resources and commitment levels (particularly among the youth – i.e., they have to see the issues as important).
- ▶ Community change is more likely to happen when that change is supported by policy at the federal, provincial/ territorial and community levels.
- ▶ Policy makers should be aware of how important it is to projects that the contributions made by youth are respected.
- ▶ The chance of project success is better when the partners in the community development process agree on values. This includes knowing the issues, agreeing on the importance of youth issues, having a good mix of people in the project, and being able to agree on important decisions.
- ▶ Projects should be aware that group members will come and go and that turnover among youth participants will be particularly high. In small communities, this turnover probably will not happen as often. In large communities, continuity can be kept by regular recruitment, orientation and training activities.
- ▶ Projects in which youth and service providers are trying to have an impact on the service system stand a greater chance of success where:
 - ◆ there is some community history of cooperation between agencies,
 - ◆ the system has dealt with difficult and complex issues,
 - ◆ the system has cooperated in communications, planning, case information-sharing, referrals, etc.,
 - ◆ citizens participate in system decisions,
 - ◆ government and other key players are involved in system decisions,
 - ◆ there is leadership development within the group,
 - ◆ there is a history of youth being involved in policy and decision making,

- ◆ there is interest in becoming involved in the existing youth-based project,
- ◆ the system has decision and policy makers who are “champions” of the changes suggested, and
- ◆

- ▶ Community development efforts will be more successful when local specialists provide services to the project and local people contribute resources to the project.
- ▶ The chance of success for the community development effort is better when the project tries to involve the community in planning, identifying needs, setting priorities and putting the project into action.
- ▶ Projects which are trying to make changes in the service system should try to create or strengthen existing, self-run, local institutions, rather than depend on outside resources.

- ▶ It is very important to provide time at the beginning of the project for trust building and skill development. The group should become a community within itself. Projects which have a goal where youth are expected to work with the community should be at least 18 months long.
- ▶ The opportunity for open discussions, dreaming and realistic discussions on solutions to issues is important to youth. Strict concentration on objectives may not meet youth process and participation needs.
- ▶ Project goals seem better pursued when youth work closely with adults. Adults may think that youth want to function without adult involvement; however, youth will not often seek organizational commitment and community goals on their own.
- ▶ Successful youth participation programs are designed with the following ideas in mind:
 - ◆ they involve youth in activities which are challenging and interesting,
 - ◆ they give youth the training they need,
 - ◆ they have youth involvement in planning and decision making,
 - ◆ youth and adults work closely together, and
 - ◆ there is an opportunity for youth to think critically about their own activities.
- ▶ A clear sense of direction and role for the project is necessary. Project personnel should develop the skills needed to manage funding, steering committees and, in some cases, their communities, to keep control of their projects and keep their goals on track.
- ▶ Youth-based organizations should be imaginative and open, encouraging creativity and having honest, realistic discussions about the issues facing them.
- ▶ Respect for differences and individual values must be part of the group process.

- ▶ If youth and adults work together to set their own goals, the goals they seek will be within the reach of the people involved. Groups will not seek a future beyond their own ability to imagine or visualize it.
- ▶ Groups should try to come up with ways to seek change that are practical and involve cooperation between groups. This effort will have the effect of bringing together youth needs with service providers.
- ▶ Sometimes, the goals and direction of the project need to change. This may require the assistance of an objective outside person who is familiar with group dynamics and the intent of the project to assist the group in working through this change.
- ▶ The project group will have to develop different skills so that it can deal with changes that may happen when the project is being implemented. These skills might include community education, dealing with the media, facilitating discussion groups and workshops, and one-on-one interventions.
- ▶ The more quickly the project group moves toward the production of something that the community and youth see as important, the more youth will stay involved and the more the project will move toward its desired goal.
- ▶ Wherever possible, the project should try to create opportunities for job creation and skill development. These opportunities will help keep youth involved by tying the community goals together with personal development.
- ▶ Projects should always be thinking about ways in which the project can continue after funding has run out. This thinking should begin early in the project.

- ▶ Adult participants must quickly develop a sense of when to help fix a problem, when to allow the youth to do it on their own and when the solution should be found together. Youth need to go through the learning that comes from success and failure but not at the cost of feeling they have been abandoned or are being controlled by adults.
- ▶ All youth-based projects need to build in a self-help capability to allow members to deal with personal issues at the same time they are dealing with the larger community issues.
- ▶ Project coordinators should try to meet youth needs for leadership development, creating

- ▶ Many youth involved with community groups have a personal history of dealing with survival needs. As such, they have had to live in the present and may lack skills in planning for the future. These skills should be developed.
- ▶ Some youth will have a long history of living without conventional rules or structure

- ▶ If the project goal is directed toward youth involvement in agency change, the sooner the partner agencies are invited into the process, the greater the chance of project success.
- ▶ Try to create project work and processes where the needs of youth and adults are valued, openly discussed and incorporated. Youth tend to value respect, caring, opportunities to participate, choice, responsibility and security. Adults tend to value security, identity, usefulness, competence and autonomy.
- ▶ At the beginning of the project, adults must play the role of starting and leading the project. As youth develop more skills and confidence, adults transfer some of this responsibility so that it is shared equally. This initial leadership role by adults should balance the needs of youth to participate and feel ownership for the process.
- ▶ Many of the adult service providers who want to help with the project will not have the skills necessary to undertake community development or the power needed to make policy changes in the system. They may have to be trained in the techniques needed to accomplish the project goals.
- ▶ If agency commitment to the project is desired, it should come in the form of a resolution of the board of directors and be communicated through the agency's executive director. Having an adult front-line worker involved with the group does not necessarily mean that the agency is committed to the project.
- ▶ Adult group members should be aware that they provide a certain organizational and emotional steadiness to the project. This is particularly true in projects where there is a high turnover of youth membership.
- ▶ Orientation and training sessions for the partner agencies should be built in as part of putting the project into action. This training should not assume that adults know how to work effectively with youth. Adults may have to be trained on how to work as true partners with youth.
- ▶ To keep the project healthy, efforts should be made to continually recruit adults and youth.
- ▶ The best partnerships are formed around common concerns and specific problems.
- ▶ Partnerships will develop much more smoothly when "youth-friendly" adults and agencies are asked to become involved.
- ▶ Success is achieved when youth and adults share both management and operational tasks.
- ▶ It may be helpful to begin youth/adult partnerships by giving adults "personal discovery exercises" which will ask them about:
 - ◆ their own reasons for becoming involved;
 - ◆ their willingness to share control, even in their own field of work;

- ◆ their perception of their effectiveness in dealing with youth compared with the perception of the youth they are working with; and
 - ◆ their ability to be a role model.
- ▶ Adult members of the group must understand that the transfer of power and skills from the adults to the youth is a planned process that must take place over time.
 - ▶ There must be a proper balance between adults and youth and between healthy and less healthy group members. Without this balance, the group may not develop properly.
 - ▶ Adults must remember that their actions speak louder than words regarding attitudes and respect for youth. Adult members who do not participate send a clear message about the priority of youth concerns.
 - ▶ Adults provide a valuable role in youth/adult partnerships. They serve to validate youth decisions and actions in the minds of the youth. Validation is especially important for youth who have low self-esteem.
- ▶ Projects need to find a balance between the need for youth to work out their own communications before meeting with adults and the need to have these communications as an ongoing process between youth and adults. The project should create opportunities for youth to meet ahead of youth/adult meetings to work out what they want to say. Another option is to have an opportunity for youth to break out of meetings, have a discussion and return with their ideas better formed.
 - ▶ Projects should take every opportunity to communicate to the general public the needs of the youth and other youth issues related to the project. If possible, the project should use methods and contacts developed by the sponsor and other agencies already involved rather than trying to develop its own.
 - ▶ Projects should try to get public input into the project implementation process at all stages. Public input will clarify the project's intentions to the community, build support and help relieve any fears the public may have.
 - ▶ The project should have a discussion near its beginning about how communication will happen between funders, sponsors, project coordinator and youth. All information should be given at an appropriate level of literacy.



- ◆ ability to transfer power to the participants without being threatened,
- ◆ ability to be a friend and adviser at the same time

- ▶ The project should look for mentors with the same personal qualities of character and integrity that are required of the project coordinator and other adults in the process.

- ▶ Building a good relationship between the funder and the actual or potential project groups is important in making the project a reality. Funders should make frequent contacts with the groups, connecting them to information, other groups and additional resources.
- ▶ Regular check points should be set to know that the group is developing as proposed.
- ▶ Where appropriate, funders should be involved at the beginning of a project in assisting the group in project design.
- ▶ Funders should recognize that community development projects involving youth are time consuming, labour intensive and require long-term commitment.
- ▶ Funders can assist projects and communities in the following ways:
 - ◆ setting in place the broader intervention in which each project is only a part,
 - ◆ maintaining the overall vision,
 - ◆ assisting with networking among projects,
 - ◆

- ◆ advocating for the project within the service system and the larger community; and
 - ◆ able to stimulate the group when it gets bogged down.
- ▶ The sponsor agency also plays a role similar to the funder and the project coordinator: It can provide the following:
 - ◆ training of youth leaders;
 - ◆ help in managing the project;
 - ◆ assistance to the project in developing realistic objectives and workplans;
 - ◆ mediation when requested;
 - ◆ credibility for the project within the community;
 - ◆ ideas;
 - ◆ connections, resources and support in a timely and helpful way;
 - ◆ advocacy, when required; and
 - ◆ easily understood administrative procedures.
- ▶ Youth must see the sponsor as active and interested participants in the process of change.
- ▶ The sponsor must use the values of healthy change and youth empowerment in its own operation and with its own clients.
- ▶ Long-term group life will depend on the recognition and support the group is given by the community. The group and the issue must be seen by the community as being important.
- ▶ The group must see itself as being important before it can actively promote its assets and importance to the wider community.
- ▶ High-profile and fun activities in the community increase public awareness of the group and its cause and attracts new youth.
- ▶ Long-term sustainability requires the development of partnerships in the community. Working on youth issues with community partners provides group members with opportunities to gain knowledge and skills in a real setting.
- ▶ Before the community development group can be seen as a full and equal partner in the community, it may have to focus away from its own individual needs only and make the connection between youth issues and larger community needs.
- ▶ Equality among partners is the strongest form of partnership. Equality is created when both parties agree that they need one another to solve a mutual problem.

- ▶ Community development groups should consider working with a broad range of partners, including media, private-sector partners, government and non-governmental organizations.
- ▶ One of the key factors that affects the group's legitimacy (and its long-term sustainability) is its ability to provide a link between other community stakeholders and youth. For instance, a community organization (e.g., a shopping mall) experiencing a problem related to youth (e.g., youth violence) may recognize that it needs to work with youth to solve the problem. Often, the community development group can make youth accessible.
- ▶ During meetings with community partners, the group may assist with problem solving, provide links with youth and relay important information on youth issues.
- ▶ The group should always be looking to identify individuals and groups who may have a need for its special skills in accessing at-risk youth.
- ▶ The group should be careful not to become a service provider or an ongoing spokesperson for the target population of youth-at-risk. It may lose valuable connections and legitimacy with youth. It serves a better role as a link between the at-risk population and the wider community in solving community problems.

