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Youth Centers: Developmental and Operational Issues



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Youth Centers: Developmental and Operational Issues

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Many communities across the nation have become increasingly concerned about the development of their youth. National data indicate that young people are experimenting with tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs, and sexual activity earlier than ever before. For example, this data indicates that 77 percent of eighth graders report having used alcohol and 26 percent say they have had five or more drinks on at least one occasion within the past two weeks (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1991). In 1989, 6185 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 were homicide victims. This number represents 16 times more casualties from violence in the United States than there were total casualties from Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991 (Children's Defense Fund, 1992). Approximately 30 percent of young adolescents report having had sexual intercourse by age fifteen, with nearly sixty percent reporting that they did not use any contraception at first intercourse (National Center for Health Statistics, 1991; Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 1986).

Localized Wisconsin data, available through the Teen Assessment Project of the University of Wisconsin Extension, often provides similar findings (Small & Hug, 1991). Furthermore, about 40 percent of young adolescents waking hours are discretionary--not committed to other activities, and are often unsupervised and/or unstructured (Timmer, Eccles, & O'Brien, 1985; Medrich & Marzke, 1991).

A recent national task force on adolescent development and community programs reported that youth and their families want prevention focused community based programs in their community. This report also found that young people value and want more opportunities to build personal and social skills. The opportunity to participate in community programs was especially valued among minority youth growing up in single parent families. Furthermore, participation in community based youth development programs can promote positive behavior and reduce high risk behavior (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992).

Fortunately, many communities have taken steps to address community conditions that may place their youth at risk of involvement in potentially problematic behaviors. One approach has been to assess the resources within the community that may serve as protective factors against the risks found in the world, and unfortunately, at times within the home. A common complaint that is often heard from youth in communities is that there is "nothing to do". In many cases, the youth are right. Often there is no local place that youth can go to socialize and have fun in a safe and semi-structured setting. To this end many communities have looked into the developing a teen or youth center.

The focus of this paper is to highlight some of the issues involved in developing and operating a youth center. Information for the report was gathered through a literature review of material related to youth centers and/or youth activities and by interviewing a number of program directors involved in youth centers in the states of Wisconsin and Connecticut.

Literature Review

When adolescents are questioned as to what they want within their community, or in an ideal youth center, they seldom hesitate in voicing their needs.

A series of focus groups exploring what adolescents want from an ideal youth center found that young people reported wanting:

- Comprehensive centers that offer a range of services.
- Centers with staff that are responsive and can address the needs of young people, including
- Ethnic and bilingual needs of specific youth populations.
- Centers with youth leaders representing a range of ages.
- Programs that address the serious concerns of today's youth.
- Programs that are accessible, and structured, yet flexible.
- Programs where youth do not feel intimidated in learning new skills or developing talents.
- Programs that provide an opportunity for youth to show what they know.
- Programs that acknowledge and address gender differences.
- Programs that address issues of violence and safety.

These focus groups met with urban, suburban and rural youth. Although there was some variation among these groups, all groups desired the following:

- Staff who would listen to and respect them.
- A safe, protected environment where they could be themselves.

- Interesting programs, including organized sports and classes on a variety of subjects (Morris & Company, 1992).

Research examining how adolescents spend their discretionary time suggests that young adolescents do not spend a large portion of their time engaged in activities sponsored by public or non-profit agencies, but when they do, they are valued if tailored to the needs of their community and peers (Medrich & Marzke, 1991). These authors found that frequently program providers fail to consider the needs, interests or issues of non-users, are not always anxious or willing to plan programs around the expressed preferences or interests of young adolescents, and rarely target or market their services to specific populations. Programs that young people most want to spend time at provide a setting where they have some structure, yet offer a substantial degree of freedom and choice. These programs also recognize the increasing "social" aspect of adolescence, recognize the unique needs and interests of their community, and provide a safe place to congregate.

Based on these findings, and their review of relevant research and practice literature, The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1992) developed ten principles of best practice in community based youth development programs.

Responsive proactive community programs for young adolescents should:

- Tailor their content and processes to the diverse backgrounds and experiences that exist among young adolescents.
- Recognize, value, and respond to the diverse backgrounds and experiences that exist among young adolescents.

- Work collectively, as well as individually, to extend their reach to underserved adolescents.
- Actively compete for young adolescents' time and attention.
- Strengthen the quality and diversity of adult leadership.
- Reach out to families, schools, and other community partners in youth development.
- Enhance the role of young people as resources to their community.
- Serve as vigorous advocates for and with youth.
- Specify and evaluate their intended outcomes.
- Establish solid organizational structures, including energetic and committed board leadership.

The following section discusses different types of youth centers; for each type, the paper discusses issues communities may need to consider in developing and operating such a center.

Types of Youth Centers

In general, youth centers can be categorized into three models. These include free standing independent centers, affiliated centers, and programmatic youth centers. As will be discussed, each has unique advantages and disadvantages.

Free Standing Youth Centers

One type may be referred to as free standing independent youth centers. These youth centers have been developed with the sole operational purpose of

servicing as a center for young adults. They often offer the most challenge, yet may have the potential to offer the greatest reward.

Specifically, one of the most critical issues that will need to be addressed in developing and operating such a facility is capital. Above and beyond costs associated with acquiring the building/location in the first place, such facilities often have high overhead costs. Maintenance and ongoing renovation requires a continual source of income. In addition, building staff that perform such routine maintenance as cleaning, repair of broken doors, etc. will be needed. Heating, electricity and other utilities will be ongoing costs associated with such a facility. Several sites noted that in the initial fund raising efforts, these ongoing costs were taken into account via the creation of an "endowment." While this made the original effort somewhat more laborious, it helped prevent the need for ongoing fund raising efforts for such routine needs. This enabled, to some extent, the focus of other fund raising efforts to be more directed to programming. The establishment of a non-profit tax status helped in the procurement, and utilization of, needed revenue.

Some sites were successful in leasing facilities from municipal or state governments for nominal fees. These sites were buildings that were no longer in use, and/or had outrun their usefulness. For example, in Darien, Connecticut, agreements were made whereby a former railroad depot was converted into a youth center. In Stoughton, Wisconsin, a former warehouse was transformed into a youth center. Efforts in Hillsboro, Wisconsin, enabled a former tavern to be converted into

a youth center. While the tavern was not formerly owned by the town, assistance and support from the town help to make the conversion possible.

Associated with operational and capital costs, issues dealing with liability insurance arose for some centers. A chronic problem expressed by many of the centers was the ongoing need for staffing, both paid and voluntary, both youth and adult. This was especially important for the independent full time centers.

Some of the benefits of a free standing youth center include the greater flexibility of decorating according to the tastes and desires of the youth. This flexibility and freedom to truly make it their "own" was valued highly. Associated with this is the higher visibility afforded by such a facility in a community. A free standing youth center may enable a formal or informal subleasing arrangement whereby other youth serving agencies, organizations, or businesses are able to provide services. Through such efforts, youth centers are often able to offer a wider range of programs and/or services that have a greater potential of drawing youth to the center than if they relied solely on the "center's" programming.

The ability to sublease the facilities also has the potential of generating revenue. For example, the renting of a portion of a youth center for special occasions was utilized in one community as a way to increase revenue. In another community, a relapse prevention program was being offered through such an arrangement. Similarly, another community offered afternoon martial arts classes. Free standing youth centers have greater flexibility in terms of revenue generation.

Affiliated Youth Centers

A second type or form of youth center are those associated with another agency or program. A common arrangement was using an existing structure within a community for "youth center activities" during certain times and/or days. This arrangement was frequent in communities that had a local community center or other large building.

An advantage of such an arrangement is lower operating costs than those previously noted for a free standing center. Through such an arrangement, costs associated with a variety of expenses such as building maintenance, staffing, clerical support, security issues, etc. are often reduced. These centers often function as multipurpose centers serving the needs of children, youth and the elderly. In certain communities, costs and issues of liability insurance become less problematic. Such an arrangement also minimizes the risks involved in the initial development of a youth center by reducing costs (both monetary and perceptual) if the center should fail. Proceeding in this direction may make the idea of a youth center more palatable to those who oppose the expenditure of revenue necessary for a free standing center. In addition, it can provide a less expensive avenue for demonstrating whether a free standing center is a realistic and workable option. Some communities may have a history of failed youth centers and/or centers that have been associated with negative or disruptive behaviors (real or perceived) on

the part of the youth. The affiliated youth center may also reduce concerns about the potential failure of yet another youth center and/or the negative stereotype previous youth centers have engendered.

A major area of difficulty associated with such an arrangement, however, is the limited access and freedom the youth center staff and/or the youth themselves have to the center. In some facilities, the youth have been able to "claim" a certain portion of the building as the "youth center". Thus, they were able to decorate and furnish according to their tastes. In other centers, however, this "customizing" was limited. The degree to which the facility retained its general recognition as a "community center" versus being seen as a "youth center" varied considerably. As will be expanded upon later in the text, the perception of the center that is held by the youth, and the community is critical. Those centers that are identified with a "senior citizen center" had greater difficulty drawing students than those that were perceived to be a "youth center"; another related drawback was the limited profile available to the youth center under such an arrangement.

Programmatic Youth Centers

A third type of youth center that emerged was more a programmatic youth center than a structural one. That is, in such arrangements a community agency typically "opened its doors" so to speak, for youth on a regular basis. In some of these arrangements there would be a program developed especially for youth. In other arrangements, the facility would just be open for the youth with a minimum of

structure. Examples of such arrangements are YMCA's youth nights, health and fitness centers' youth all-nighters, or "lock-ins" at schools or other facilities. In some communities the recreation department took responsibility for opening their gymnasiums for youth related activities, providing such activities as midnight basketball and volleyball leagues. These arrangements would not qualify as youth centers per se. Yet they did provide youth with a safe, semi-structured environment where they could "just be" with friends.

The advantage of such an approach is the limited expenditure of funds required; expenses come primarily from programming. Difficulties that may emerge from such an approach are:

- Coordination of "youth center activities" in conjunction with the facility's activities.
- Whether the commitment is coming from the facility or primarily a key staff person at the facility or community person.
- The vulnerability of such "extra" programming in times of limited resources.
- The real and/or perceptual issue of not having a "youth center".
- The seasonal or sporadic nature of the activities or events and the associated need for increased publicity.

There was wide variation in the number of hours these programmatic youth centers were in operation. Some centers emphasize the importance of providing a safe setting for youth at anytime; others focus on providing alternatives during "risky" times when youth are apt to drink or get involved in potentially problematic

behaviors (e.g. after athletic events, special events such as prom, super bowl weekend, and, generally late Friday and Saturday nights). The variation arose from whether the center was open during the week or just weekends. Variation also arose from whether the center was open for set hours or just during programs. The ability to maintain regular hours of operation, and the publicity of these hours was a problem for many centers. The hours of operation were dependent, in part, on the resources available, but also on the types of activities provided.

Programs

The activities of a youth center can be seen as its core. The program will be the drawing card that brings youth in, and keeps them returning. The type of activity provided will be dependent, to some extent, upon the size and resources of the youth center. There is considerable variation in the hours of operation and programming among youth centers. This is related to the identified mission of the center, the type of activities offered by the center, and the resources of the community and agency itself. Some facilities operate during after school hours and evenings. These facilities tend to offer positive youth development programs as well as recreational activities. They tend to provide a "drop in" type of atmosphere. Other facilities operate only during limited hours and days. The times are chosen to avoid conflicts with other activities within the community and/or to provide limited but strategic access to the center to foster continued interest.

The success of the programs and activities will depend, in part, on the degree of youth involvement in their development, as well as the community activities they are competing against. Activities that many youth centers offer can be broken down into three general categories, although some activities may fall into more than one category.

Recreational Activities

General recreational activities involve "fun" types of programs and/or activities that youth enjoy. They serve the purpose of providing drug and alcohol free alternatives to more problematic behaviors (Tobler, 1986). It is important that such activities identify the needs of youth that may normally be filled through alcohol and drug use or other risk taking behaviors and provide an alternative to that need. These activities can replace the kick or high that youth usually get from alcohol and drug use or other risk taking behaviors. Furthermore, the activities should be pleasurable and self-reinforcing initially, and ultimately offer long term satisfaction. These goals can best be met if young people are involved in program design and implementation. Common activities among the centers interviewed were:

- Dances with Disc Jockeys or bands
- Battle of the bands
- VCR nights with large screen T.V.s
- Video games, board games, ping pong, foos-ball, etc.

- Sports and/or leagues such as volleyball, basketball, swimming, etc.
- A variety of special events or programs
- Theme parties such as "superbowl night"
- Rock climbing
- Wilderness focused activities
- Other programs that provide elements of safe and structured risk taking

Positive Youth Development Activities

A second general category of activities that many youth centers or agencies offer are positive youth development activities. These are activities or events that involve increasing the opportunities, skills and rewards which promote the positive development of children and youth in their families, in their schools, among their peers, and in their communities. Youth centers that were able to provide positive youth development programs often are more successful in obtaining grants from state agencies and funding sources.

These activities are based on the philosophy that children and youth develop and mature primarily through sequential interaction with four major environments or social systems--families, schools, peers, and communities. First, increasing opportunities for involvement entails encouraging the creation of rewarding and gratifying roles for young people in each of these systems. This may involve examining policies dealing with youth; looking at how communication about, and with youth, is handled; and creating roles for youth within the organization. If youth

are to feel connected to their families, schools or communities, they must have opportunities to interact with them in positive and productive ways. Creating opportunities for involvement might entail any of the following strategies: developing roles for them in the entire process of developing and evaluating youth related programs; developing roles for them within the school and community organizational structure(s); and develop forums whereby youth are able to provide their input to issues affecting their peers, schools, and community. Specifically this may take the form of encouraging the participation of youth and helping the community recognize the importance of youth decision making. Some communities have been successful in developing such forums through youth advisory boards, peer education and peer leadership projects.

A second component of positive youth development activities involves providing avenues for youth to master the specific skills and competencies which are required to effectively participate in these roles and opportunities. By learning the needed skills, children and youth will participate more successfully, the community will recognize the benefits of youth input, and the youth will be rewarded appropriately. Young people with appropriate skills and competencies can more easily negotiate transition periods—i.e., school to work, stressful situations, and are more resistant to the lure of negative, destructive behaviors. Skill building promotes positive youth development by equipping young people with the skills necessary to form successful, pro social bonds with important others at home (parents and siblings), in school (peers, teachers, school staff), among peers, and in the community (peers, adults, employers). Some examples of such skills and activities

include: communication skills, assertiveness training; life skills; and family life education, tutoring and academic learning strategies; career and vocational training; peer refusal skills; and youth leadership. If students do not master such skills, they will be less likely to take advantage of opportunities that they may encounter.

The third key component involves rewards or reinforcements for successful youth involvement in positive youth development activities. Consistently rewarding positive, desirable behavior is a critical ingredient in creating a strong bond between young people and their families, peers, school and/or communities. Youth must be rewarded in an age appropriate manner for participating in existing opportunities successfully and for demonstrating skills. Creating systematic and consistent rewards and reinforcements for youth requires a continuing assessment, from a youth's perspective, of the "pay-off" of their involvement in these positive youth development activities. Examples of rewards include: verbal praise and positive feedback; academic credit; special recognition events; plaques, awards, medals, ribbons; media features in the newspaper, radio, or television; and paid rewards, i.e., salaries, stipends, scholarships, bonuses.

Professional or Paraprofessional Activities

A third general category of activities that youth centers have provided, either through youth center staffing or outside agencies and personnel, involve what may be considered professional or paraprofessional services. These services often seek to provide short term assistance and or referral to youth who are at risk of, or are,

experiencing a temporary stressful event. Such services recognize that youth have a range of health and mental health needs with varying degrees of urgency. Such activities or services may include short term counseling; shelter assistance; support groups; law enforcement intervention and/or diversion services; and health services.

Before providing professional or paraprofessional services, directly or indirectly at the center, communities will need to consider such issues as the mission of the youth center, the impact these services may have on the perception of the youth center by the youth and community (both positive and negative), liability, and the availability of these services in the community.

Implications for Developing Effective Youth Centers

Many individuals offered their opinion regarding some of the important issues or concerns to consider when developing and/or operating a youth center. Offered here are some of the consistent themes that emerged.

1. Know your target audience

A critical component in developing a youth center and/or program is knowing and defining the target audience. This will relate closely to the purpose or mission of the youth center. Why is the youth center being developed or in operation? Identifying the target audience can help develop programs targeted specifically to their needs in ways that are appropriate for their social, emotional, and intellectual development. For example, if the defined target audience is middle school youth,

the level of structure and expectations may differ than if it were geared toward high school age youth, or elementary school youth. Knowing your target audience also helps to identify what resources they may have. A recent task force on youth development and community programs identified that "many communities offer out-of-school activities that are unavailable to those adolescents who cannot travel to, pay for, or be admitted to them because of skill requirements or membership restrictions" (pg. 30 Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992).

2. Involve youth in planning and implementation

One of the clearest themes that emerged from the discussions was the absolutely critical need to have youth involved. Youth involvement ranged from having youth involved in the management of a center, serving on the board of directors, being involved in the selection of program offerings, and in the daily operation of the facility including maintenance and promotion. Youth are able to provide feedback on what is wanted among their peers, what is working and not working, and the "hottest" items or crazes that youth are involved in. Youth center staff may need to provide support such as transportation, food, accessible meeting times and/or locations to facilitate such youth involvement. The degree to which the center can provide, or address, these supports can send a strong message regarding the value of the students' involvement.

Youth are also able to provide feedback on the perception of the youth center among their peers. This point deserves serious consideration, according to youth

center directors. How the youth perceive the facility and/or program will determine, to a large degree, the success of the program. One critical perceptual issue is the target audience of the program and/or facility. Do the youth perceive the program as being geared toward younger versus older adolescents, "at risk" youth versus "normal" youth, upper class versus lower class teens, for all youth versus a select group based upon some criteria (e.g. race), type of music preference, etc? If a student went to the program and/or facility, how would he or she be perceived by their peers? A related perceptual issue is whether the center and/or program is "the place to be".

3. Build community support for the mission of the center

The perception the community holds about the youth center is just as critical. If the community views the youth center as a hang out for "rough kids", then it will be more difficult to gain ongoing support. Does the community support the program and/or facility only for a select group of students? Does the community, or elements of the community, view the youth center as a drain on limited community resources? How does the police department view the facility? How the community, including businesses, parents, administration view the youth center will determine the degree it will receive ongoing support. One community leader shared the perspective that a center is only as strong as its ability to withstand the first perceived crisis. This director adds that it is crucial to have the community supporting the center because sooner or later there will be some event perceived as a "crisis". These events can

range from a fight breaking out, to a youth appearing intoxicated, to unsubstantiated rumors. Such events can easily fit into a "non-supporter's" agenda (hidden or otherwise). Youth center staff must be vigilant about the perceived image the center is generating, and continually developing community support.

4. Be prepared for the roller coaster of youth participation

The ability of the center and/or program to weather the roller coaster of youth participation will help to determine its survivability. New centers often go through a honeymoon period where the attendance and excitement run high. Many program leaders noted that youth involvement and participation in the center will vary considerably during the year. A center needs to be solvent enough to handle such fluctuations. In some locations, this was seasonal with decreased involvement during the summer months, school vacations. etc. According to alcohol related crashes in Wisconsin, this is when alternatives may be needed the most. Other locations noted that participation varied with the activities offered by the center and/or the resources and activities offered in the community. Knowing what the youth center is "competing" against is advisable. The center will want to avoid competing against positive community events while offering a positive alternative to events that typically result in vandalism, rowdiness or underage drinking, arrests, etc. Slumps in youth participation can be avoided by marketing efforts targeted toward attracting and retaining youth attendance.

5. Know how success will be defined

The number of youth involved in the center is only one measure of success. Success may be defined differently by the youth, program staff, the community, and funders. Knowing what criteria these groups use to judge the success of a youth center helps determine what type of data to collect and share with the community.

6. Stay in the black, avoid the red—Knowing your expected cash flow

The development of a youth center should not be seen as a money making venture. A consistent theme from those experienced in operating youth centers are that youth centers seldom make money. There are few avenues for making money in the operation of a youth center. Most students do not have a lot of money to spend. Revenue that is produced through cover charges, soda and food, and the selling of select items generally only covers the costs associated with the program being offered. In some areas, such costs limit the youth who can participate. Several youth centers prided themselves on their ability to avoid costs to the participating youth. The roller coaster attendance by youth can also create fiscal nightmares. Those centers that appear to be the most solvent have been successful in linking up with state and local funding agencies, civic groups, and businesses within their communities.

7. Keep one step ahead

The ability to keep ahead of the trends was identified as an important factor in keeping the youth center a popular place. One center prided itself on being able

to stay 2-3 months ahead of the trends. That is, their bands and programming was being offered as the trend was rising in popularity. Youth involvement was crucial in being able to identify the latest trends likely to be accepted by the local youth.

8. Hire and Involve youth oriented staff

The staffing of the center needs to be youth oriented and sensitive to the needs and issues of youth. Staff need the skills to relate to youth, yet offer the appropriate level of structure, in the most appropriate fashion. How the youth perceive the staff may be an important factor in the degree of their involvement and participation. Staff need to be able to meet the youth where youth are. Support for staffing was identified as being an important element in the running of a youth center. The hours and days that most youth centers operate often are in conflict with the "normal working day" and often overlap with the days and times that adults want to socialize as well. Having sufficient resources to allow for time off and flexible scheduling can help to alleviate burnout and turnover of staff.

9. Develop established rules and procedures

Establishing the rules of the center is critical in providing the appropriate amount of structure for the facility. Also critical is having the involvement of youth in the formation of the rules. Youth are more apt to abide by the rules if young people are involved in their development. Issues that arise and need to be addressed include:

*Smoking and tobacco use—Are students allowed to smoke and/or use tobacco products? If so, where can they use these? How does this affect the image and perception of the youth center in both positive and negative ways?

*Alcohol and drug use—Since teen substance use is illegal, what is the policy of the center if a student is caught on the premises with alcohol or drugs? What are the procedures that will be followed? What happens when a youth appears to be intoxicated or under the influence? What is the responsibility of the youth center, and what steps will be followed?

*Attendance issues—For special events and/or programming are students permitted to leave and come as they please? Does this have any impact on programming? Does it increase the likelihood of students appearing intoxicated? Does it create the atmosphere desired by youth and/or staff?

*Music—How is the music that may be provided during dances or special occasions selected? Is there any screening that occurs by the youth, adults, or staff? Who decides the type of music (e.g. rap, heavy metal, or top 40) and how often it's played or performed? Is the music consistent with the preferences of the targeted audiences?

*Community youth versus all youth—In some communities concern may arise regarding who is attending the youth center. Associated with knowing the center's targeted audience is the issue of whether the facility is open only to local youth versus youth outside the community. If only local youth are

desired, how will youth be screened. Rules and procedures need to address this issue in advance. Under what conditions may exceptions be allowed (e.g. boyfriends or girlfriends from other towns or cities)? Will exceptions be made occasionally for special events? Issues for consideration include the potential for inter-town rivalry (or violence) surfacing, the location of the center with respect to being identified as a community youth center versus a geographical center, the size of the community, the economic needs of the youth center, parameters established by funding sources, etc. One approach taken is the issuance of "membership" cards that youth need for access to the center. This allows for a certain amount of screening to occur as well as providing needed information in the case of an emergency.

Administrative Issues

In addition to the preceding discussion on important issues and concerns, other administrative issues need to be addressed for the successful operation of a youth center.

Food and Beverages

The issue of how to handle food and beverages is one that many youth centers struggle with. The offering of prepared food frequently makes the center more attractive to youth. Yet such complex issues as food permits, health standards, staffing, and costs render this service costly in terms of time and money. As an alternative many facilities have gone to making vending machines available for the youth.

Advisory Board

The establishment and role of an advisory board is an important administrative and structural issue. Many centers strongly advocate for an advisory board that incorporates youth involvement. This board may also meet certain funding eligibility requirements, possibly facilitating the approval of funding agencies and/or opening up more opportunities for generating revenue. Issues that will need to be taken into consideration in the development and operation of the advisory board include:

- What is the role of the board? That is, will the board serve solely in an advisory capacity or will the board set policy?
- How will appointments be made to the board, who will make them, and how long will terms be?
- What will be the role of youth? Will they have the same voting and decision making capabilities as adult members? Or, will they serve and/or have voting privileges only on certain issues or committees? How will they be selected? How many youth will be involved and what ages will they be?
- How will members be transitioned on and off the board?

Community Collaboration

The ability of the youth center to collaborate and access resources within the community can become a key factor in its ability to survive and more effectively serve the needs of youth. Collaboration with local civic groups can help to provide

resources such as volunteers for special events or programs, (e.g. chaperons, mentors, tutors, Big Brothers, Big Sisters); in-kind services (e.g. printing); and financial resources (e.g. donations or joint fund raising activities).

The ability of the youth center to collaborate with the school system can be an important asset. Such collaboration may increase access to the students for such things as meetings, publicity, surveys, etc. Partnerships with the school decreases the likelihood of duplication of programming and may provide access to sources of funding through grants. Linkages between the school staff and the youth center may be especially relevant depending on the youth involved in the youth center and the type of services provided (e.g. mental health services provided by the youth centers).

Cooperative arrangements with other social service programs within the community may benefit both the youth center and the social service program. Such linkages may increase funding for the center if it is able to serve as a location for services. Depending on the type of youth center developed, joint programming may be available (e.g. job skills, training, young parents' program, teen pregnancy prevention programming). Such linkages between social service agencies and the youth center may ultimately provide a broader spectrum of services and resources to the youth of a community as well as helping to solidify the center within the community.

Finally, collaborations with the local municipal government and/or agencies may reduce costs and/or increase community support. Youth centers may be able to gain access to town facilities which, in turn, may reduce overhead costs, and reduce liability expenses. Police coverage for special events may be negotiated at reduced costs. Or, special programs or events may be offered jointly with the police department, fire department, or the parks and recreation department or commission.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has reviewed three models of youth centers; free standing, affiliated, and programmatic. Each of these have their disadvantages and advantages. A community's choice will depend, in part, on the resources of the community, the history of youth centers within that community, and the mission of the proposed center.

The activities of the youth center will be the core and magnet to the youth. Activities of youth centers, predominantly fall into three categories; recreational, positive youth development, and paraprofessional or professional. The choice of activities will depend upon the targeted audience, the resources of the youth center, and the alternative activities within the community that will compete against the youth center's activities.

This paper has also served to tap into the experiences of youth center directors by offering a synopsis of issues and concerns that need to be addressed in the running of a youth center. One common theme that was expressed among the directors was the critical role youth play in the development and operation of

youth centers. Without the voice of the youth, youth centers are more likely to flounder. Other concerns addressed within the paper focused on having established rules and procedures for youth related issues, knowing how the youth center will be evaluated by the youth and the community, and planning for, and anticipating the roller coaster of youth participation.

This paper has served only to highlight some of the issues involved in developing and operating a youth center. While the issues involved in the development of a youth center are far more complex than offered here, they will also vary from one community to another. The short life span of many youth centers attest to the difficulty and complexity of establishing youth centers and sustaining them as well. Despite these difficulties, youth centers have the potential of helping a community to provide a setting for their youth to develop in a healthy and positive manner.

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