



Nontraditional Outreach Brings More Diverse Groups of Youth onto Marin Youth Council

Youth Council: County of Marin Youth Council

Element: Youth Leadership

Function: Convening Local Leadership to Take Action

Subject: Youth Involvement, Serving Special Populations

The Challenge: The County of Marin Youth Council members wanted to involve a truly diverse group of youth on their Youth Subcommittee. They envisioned the Subcommittee as a vibrant forum for youth from throughout the county, a place where they could voice their opinions on a wide range of issues. However, the Youth Council had relied on traditional community partners such as schools and Parent Teacher Associations to invite young people to join the Subcommittee. These partners did not have strong connections with at-risk youth and so were not able to reach out effectively to them.

The Practice and Evidence: Members of the Subcommittee had to find other, more direct avenues for engaging vulnerable youth. They realized they would have to build a relationship with each youth. The Council members also saw that they would have to show the youth that their vote counted just as much as the adults' votes did. The adult members recognized too, that one member of their Council already had relationships with the youth they were trying to reach, Janis Reynolds of the County Department of Health and Human Services. Council members agreed to have Reynolds take charge.

Reynolds reports that the Marin County program she works for, the Youth Employment Program, "had already formed partnerships with local court-mandated schools." These partnerships seemed like perfect avenues for accessing at-risk youth. In particular, the Youth Employment Program, working with its school partners, had run summer career preparation programs under WIA's predecessor, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). One summer program, Project Workability, involved recruiting and training youth to be peer mentors at their schools and various service organizations for the following year. Reynolds thought this program would be an excellent place to find and invite youth to participate on the Council.

Reynolds went to her Youth Council and asked them to request that the Workforce Investment Board let the Marin Youth Council use some of its funding to run the summer program. Given the opportunity the summer program offered to engage at-risk youth on the Council, the Board agreed. Reynolds then asked the alumni of Project Workability who were serving as peer mentors to recommend youth they were working with for the 2000 summer program.

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During the summer program, Reynolds used a three-stage process to select potential Youth Council members. First, she identified the youth who seemed most likely to be a good match. The criteria she used included their determination and their belief in themselves.

Reynolds emphasized that the youth were selected based on their abilities, not on their age. Second, Reynolds invited these young people to serve as peer mentors during the summer program so that they could be involved in leadership right away and so she could support them in their leadership roles. Third, at the end of the program, after working with the youth as they mentored others, Reynolds invited seven of the peer summer mentors to serve on the Youth Subcommittee. All seven agreed to join.

Once the initial group was established, Reynolds asked these youth members to do outreach in their communities by talking about the Youth Council and by recommending other potential members. As a result, the youth members have been very involved in engaging other youth. Since July of 2000, twenty youth have served on the Marin Youth Council. “Whether it’s a question of the Council finding the right youth or vice versa, the level of commitment is exceptional,” reports Reynolds.

The Details: Reynolds shares two valuable sets of practices that have emerged from their experience on the Marin Youth Council. The first is to make sure that at least one member of the Youth Council has a strong relationship with any prospective youth member. “You have to establish a real reason why they should bother with you. [You have to show them that] the discussion isn’t the same without them,” Reynolds emphasizes. Council members like Reynolds, youth service providers who already have relationships with young people, are especially well positioned to do outreach. Worth noting is that Reynolds incorporates her engagement efforts into her regular work, which means that only very modest additional resources need to be allocated for outreach.

The second practice has to do with how youth are identified. Reynolds explains, “There are lots of terms to describe these youth, but they all carry baggage: WIA eligible, low income, part of the juvenile justice system, pregnant, parenting, and dealing with substance abuse. I don’t want them to carry that baggage, so I use the term ‘nontraditional’ [when I refer to them outside of Youth Council meetings].” Even more important, Reynolds says, is not to identify youth members in any way other than as youth. “When you bring any youth together, and they bring their identity badges on, they bring that identity. To be able to participate without the stigma or the baggage was our goal for them. To us, they’re just youth.” Because Reynolds didn’t identify them in any specific way when they joined the Youth Council Subcommittee, the nontraditional youth were able to “participate with a clean slate, just like anybody else.”

Breakthrough Moment: Reynolds knew that their engagement strategy was really working when the Youth Council learned of a grant program designed to help homeless youth stay in school. One youth on the Subcommittee helped several young homeless youth get access to the grants. Afterward, an adult member of the Subcommittee asked the youth, “How did you get so

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many people connected with the program?” “Because they were at the shelter with me,” was her reply. That was the first time that she identified herself as a homeless youth, and it was a powerful moment for everyone.

What’s Next for this YCidea? The Marin Youth Council and Janis Reynolds continue to reach out to nontraditional youth through Youth Employment Programs, and youth members of the Subcommittee also engage their peers. They still use the practices Reynolds describes above.

Where to Go for More Information

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