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## Youth Forums Garner the “Voice of Youth”

**Youth Council:** Orange County Youth Council

**Element:** Youth Leadership

**Function:** Measuring Quality and Impact of Local Efforts and Convene Local Leadership to Take Action

**Subject:** Youth Involvement

**The Challenge:** Young people have valid and innovative ideas regarding how to best address the needs of youth. They can also greatly benefit from being involved in designing youth programs and policies and in leadership efforts in their communities. However, youth programming and policies are often planned and developed with little or no youth involvement or input. Following its Resource Mapping Project, the Orange County Youth Council wanted to meaningfully engage youth in decision making. They wanted to find a way to hear from youth about their needs.

**The Practice and Evidence:** To initiate the effort in involving youth, Orange County Youth Council, along with partner organizations, planned and hosted four regional youth forums throughout the county to hear what youth thought they need to be successful. Three additional forums were held at a later time. The youth forums were a catalyst for the development of leadership teams called Youth Action Committees (YACs). (Regional provider networks were also created as a result.) Furthermore, the information gathered at the forums was collected and disseminated. It was used to shape Orange County Youth Council’s work plan and RFP as well as to fuel other initiatives to address common needs.

Other benefits from the youth forums have been the continual source of youth representation to the Youth Council and their integral role in decision making as well as the restructuring of Youth Council meetings to be more “youth-friendly.”

**The Details:** Beginning in 2003, the county’s three Youth Councils partnered to engage youth leadership and hear what youth felt was important to their success. Spearheaded by an intermediary coalition, the Orange County Coalition for Youth (OCCY), all seven forums collected common data, had similar formats, and shared practices from one forum to the next. OCCY was supported by the three Youth Councils as well as over twenty other youth-serving agencies to be a leveraging agent for youth programs and to serve as a means to help get closer to the common goal of “All Youth - One System.”

Four of the seven youth forums were co-sponsored by the Orange County Youth Council, and the results have had a direct impact on WIA Youth program design. The findings have been incorporated in the county’s WIA RFP by requiring providers to facilitate active YACs that

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are ongoing sources of youth feedback and leadership. “Our Youth Council work plan has now been aligned to address the most current [Orange County] youth issues as expressed by young people,” says Mercedes Julian, staff to the Orange County Youth Council.

The youth forums were sponsored, in part, by the Youth Demonstration Grant from California Department of Education in 2002-2003. The grant was used in part to support the resource mapping project/capacity building project. The county’s three Youth Councils partnered with the project. The youth forum data provided qualitative information, which helped support the resource mapping results from 2002 and 2003.

**Breakthrough Moment:** Collaboration was critical to making the forums successful, and each partner was able to contribute to the tangible project of a forum. According to Julian, a breakthrough moment occurred when the forum planners began working together. “Partners found they had a common goal of hearing and involving youth.” This discovery energized all the participants. All in all, over 40 youth-serving agencies and 75 local businesses contributed to the youth forum initiative.

**What’s Next for this YCidea?** This is a constantly evolving process as youth-involvement continues to grow and build capacity. The Youth Action Committees continue to be active in giving input and in community service projects. Some areas are planning mini-forums to rekindle enthusiasm and involve more youth in their regional efforts. Julian comments, “Now youth have built confidence from working side by side with adults and having their voices heard.”

### **Where to Go for More Information**

Orange County Youth Council

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