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## Youth Development Program to Support Career Preparation

**Youth Council:** San Bernardino City Youth Council

**Elements:** Youth Leadership, Career Preparation, and Youth Development and Support

**Functions:** Coordinating Youth Services, Engaging Local Leadership to Take Action

**Subjects:** Innovative Programs, Youth Involvement, and Serving Special Populations

**The Challenge:** According to Cynthia Cervantes, Division Chief of the City of San Bernardino Employment and Training Agency (SBETA), the city is on the rebound. They have gone through hard times with very high unemployment and poverty, especially among young people. Because so many of the city's youth face multiple challenges, the Youth Council wanted to support career programs that serve youth who are at risk not only because of low family income but who also have barriers to employment such as having skill deficiencies, being teenage parents, or being high school dropouts.

**The Practice and Evidence:** The Youth Council decided to support San Bernardino's long standing Youth Development Program (YDP) in order to provide at-risk youth with a multifaceted youth leadership development and career preparation opportunity. The YDP is an eleven-day summer residential program that the city has operated since 1981. The focus of YDP is to provide the participants with practical work experience that enhances positive attitudes about work and to share information on career opportunities. Other goals include building self confidence and responsibility.

The program is held each summer on the University of Redlands campus or at another college in the area. Participants live in dormitories and create a miniature town called Micro City. Every person is responsible for filling a government or business role in the city. Goal setting and team work are featured while at the same time each person sees how his or her actions affect everyone. Participants establish rules of conduct that everyone must abide by, such as no profanity; if a youth breaks a rule, he or she may be called before the court, tried, and, if found guilty, issued a penalty such as having to bus tables for two meals.

Elections are held for five of the community roles: police chief, mayor, judge, public prosecutor, and environmental services chief. Everyone who is interested in one of these positions has to run a campaign that includes pulling together a campaign staff and giving a speech. An election is held on the morning of the third day of camp.

Adult community leaders are an important component of the program, and many participate by joining the camp for a day and partnering with a youth who has taken on a comparable role in Micro City. These leaders also run seminars for youth.

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In previous years, when more funding was available, 100 youth between the ages of 14 and 17 participated. In 2005, 50-60 youth between the ages of 16 and 21 will take part.

Throughout the life of the program, alumni, parents, and community leaders have commented on the positive effects on the youth who participate. For example, Cervantes noted in a 2002 *Redlands Daily Facts* article that “for a lot of [the youth], it’s the first time someone believed in them. Afterwards they come out much more positive people. They’re encouraged to do goal planning, and they realize that staying in school produces results and gives them more confidence knowing they’re leaders themselves. They also realize they’re responsible for the kind of community they live in.” Dr. Mims, the founding director of YDP, told the *Redlands Daily Facts* in 2002, “I would . . . guess that at least 85 percent of [the youth] go back to finish high school, or if they don’t, they at least become more [accomplished] in their life skills.”

Participation by adults also benefits the youth. Over the years, some alumni have come back as business owners and leaders, and they talk to the current participants and serve as role models. The other business people and elected officials talk to youth as well, and the San Bernardino mayor spends time with the camp mayor. The police and fire chief come year after year. “You should see the [youths’] faces when they’re talking to the mayor or police chief,” says Cervantes. “Afterwards, the young people go ‘I’m talking to this person!’”

According to Cervantes, the adult leaders always find the participants to be outstanding. “Without fail adults say ‘I’m so impressed with these youth,’” she notes. A 2004 article in the *San Bernardino Sun* reports that the Sheriff Department’s Captain Sheree Stewart told the participants, “I want to hire you. I want to put everyone we hire through this program.”

Youth participants also report benefits. For example, Brian Offiah, a 21-year old who took part in the 2004 Micro City, told the *Press-Enterprise* that he liked the program because he felt that people really cared. “Everybody in the environment wanted us to figure out what was best for us, to figure out a goal. They really helped us.” Jamal Moreno, who was 17 when he was elected Micro City 2002’s mayor, told the *Press-Enterprise*, “Sometimes you aren’t sure if you are capable of what is expected of you, but now that I’ve been here, I know I am. You learn job skills here, and the seminars inform us how to maximize [them].”

**The Details:** YDP began in the late 1970’s as a country-wide program sponsored by the National Football League Players Association. In 1981, the Association stopped providing funding, so the founding director, Dr. Dennis Mims, approached communities and counties where there were many high risk youth about continuing the program. The City of San Bernardino was sold on the idea from the beginning, and has sponsored the camp every year since then. They have had some private funding from individual donors as well as from the San Bernardino Arrowhead Credit Union. In recent years, the Youth Council funding has made it possible to continue the program.

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For many years, the City of San Bernardino has been the only city to continue the YDP. Dr. Mims and his staff run the camp, and they supply the curriculum. In 1997, the Youth Development Program was honored as one of the best programs in the nation for youth, and Dr. Mims won the National Association of Counties (NACO) individual award for youth program leadership.

All the YDP staff have other jobs. One is a licensed psychologist; another works for Los Angeles City College District; a third is a business owner, and a fourth an insurance agent. All of these staff members use their personal vacation time in order to participate.

Initially the San Bernardino YDP was geared towards first-year high school students to help them set goals early, and to encourage them to believe in themselves. These youth were high risk but in school. “Now,” says Cervantes, “we gear it towards older youth and out-of-school youth because that’s the focus of our funding. We have reformatted the curriculum so that, for example, teenage mothers can leave their children with other family members while they participate.” She goes on to say, “With the out-of-school youth, we ask them, ‘What are you going to do now? Here are some options.’ Our intent is to get them back into school or higher career-level educations.”

**Breakthrough Moment:** According to Cervantes, each summer has at least one breakthrough moment, but they all are similar. She tells it this way: “Some of the youth are very resistant about going to this program. They’re cool and independent; no one tells them what to do. They are pretty used to calling the shots for themselves. [Having a schedule] is not exactly what they want to hear. Or some of them have never left their neighborhood, and they don’t want to leave their family setting. They are very fearful about that. So they come here to our office, and they are clinging to their mom or their children. They are kind of having a hard time; some of them are crying because they just don’t want to leave. Yet you see them a couple of days later at the camp and you see them [doing great] in their roles, or at the parent night performance. Then when you see them at the end, you see tears again because they don’t want to leave.” Cervantes continues: “The other [breakthrough moments] are the reactions of the business and community leaders. We try to bring new people in each year. The first-time reaction of a community leader is really significant to see.”

**What’s Next for this YCidea?** Funding has been dwindling, but they have been continuing the program on a reduced scale, and hope to extend the program into the future. Dr. Mims has stated that he would like to secure national support for the program so that it can be delivered on a larger scale to benefit many more young people.

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## Where to Go for More Information

San Bernardino City Youth Council

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## Tools

The following tools are available through the City of San Bernardino Employment and Training Agency:  
Excerpts from Student Handbook  
Typical daily schedule