



Partnership-Run Youth Opportunity Centers are Youth Friendly

Youth Council: Riverside County Council for Youth Development

Element: Comprehensive Approach, Career Preparation, Youth Development and Support, Academic Excellence

Function: Coordinating Youth Services

Subject: Youth One-Stops, Coordinating Youth Services

The Challenge: When the Riverside County Council for Youth Development (CYD) received WIA funding in July 2000, the legislation emphasized providing comprehensive services to youth within a single system. Riverside staff felt that young people needed less intimidating, more hands-on services than would be available at their adult One-Stops. They also realized that no single organization would be able to deliver all of the ten required program elements, and that the solution lay in community partnerships. The goal was to make sure to meet the employment and education needs of all Riverside County youth, including those not funded under WIA.

The Practice and the Evidence: In 2000 the Riverside County Council for Youth Development established seven partnership-operated Youth Opportunity Centers (YOCs) across the county. The Centers provide tutoring, assistance with keeping youth in school, GED preparation, leadership development and civic responsibility, work-readiness skills, paid work experience, and internships. The YOCs also offer support services such as mental health counseling, drug or substance abuse counseling, mental health support, and occupational skills training. The form this training takes is created by each partnership, and each Center operates differently. For example, one concentrates on technology, offering sound production, graphic design, and computer facilities. Another focuses on the construction trades, with youth building guitars, cabinets, and grandfather clocks. Youth who move can transfer to that city's YOC. Once youth have completed these programs, job placement and access to post-secondary education are the primary activities of the Riverside Youth Opportunity Centers. The Centers serve approximately 1200 youth a year, and met or exceeded WIA performance outcomes during the last program year.

The Details: The CYD put out an RFP that stipulated their requirements for each partnership contract. There had to be a designated lead agency and a minimum of four partners (including a local school district, a business partner, and a community-based organization). This structure was chosen in order to ensure that comprehensive services were provided, and to leverage resources as effectively as possible. "For example," explains Felicia Miller, Youth Programs Manager, "instead of having the YMCA run one of Youth Opportunity Centers and try and do all ten program elements, in our model the YMCA would be the lead agency. They might provide leadership development, which they're very good at, but they would partner with other

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community organizations to do the academic skills, work preparation, and other elements. That way we're leveraging resources as well as expertise."

It took the better part of a year to get all seven centers up and running. The CYD drew on a significant sum of Job Training Partnership Act money as well as their first allocation of WIA money. Each partnership had a Youth Advisory group that advised on layout and the design in order to make the Centers highly youth-friendly, another requirement in the RFP. Each has its own flavor; one has a dance floor, another a pool table; each has a resource area, workshop space, and a place with comfortable couches, bright colors, sound systems, television, and Play Station games. "And young people themselves were part of designing them," emphasizes Tiki White, Youth Council Coordinator.

The time pressure brought political pressure, and White advises against trying to open seven facilities at once. She also recommends a hard look at the experience and track record of the agencies being brought in to run the YOCs. "Some organizations had highly skilled, talented staff who knew how to develop great partnerships, who understood youth development, and who could really implement the vision. Other lead agencies didn't have that skill level and ended up trying to do everything themselves. And that was not successful even though we provide lot of technical assistance," Miller explains. Two-year contracts expired on July 1, 2004, at which point the less effective partnerships were replaced.

Success depends on strong community partnerships and commitment, the ability to leverage resources, and the capacity to raise additional money. "You cannot count on one funding stream," says White. WIA funding has since been cut by 50 percent, leaving it unable to support the YOCs nearly so well as in the past. However, partnerships had been informed from the beginning that they would need to seek out other sources of income beyond the WIA seed money. Each is now being called upon to do so to a greater degree, whether in the form of additional cash from grants or more resources leveraged from the community.

Breakthrough Moment: It took a good year and a half to do all of the improvements, to get young people involved, to train staff on all the regulations, to get all the partnerships in place, and to start the programs. It was then, as White and Miller visited Centers filled with busy young people and attended recognition ceremonies for youth who had completed the program or otherwise excelled, that they realized that the YOCs were achieving their goal.

What's Next for the YCidea? Each Youth Opportunity Center must be certified to continue to receive funding from the Youth Council, which is now implementing a continuous quality improvement system. The evaluations are conducted by an independent group of private-sector businesses invited onto the Youth Council by the WIB. Quantitative measures were already in place, but "this is really about quality," says White. "We want to make sure our Youth Centers are run in the best way, at the highest quality because our young people deserve that."

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Where to Go for More Information

Riverside County Council for Youth Development

Felicia Miller

Youth Programs Manager

(951) 955-3100

fmiller@rivcoeda.org