

# Issue Brief



Employment and Social Services  
Contact: Thomas MacLellan, 202/624-5427  
July 27, 2000

## **State Youth Development Strategies to Improve Outcomes for At-Risk Youth**

### **Executive Summary**

An estimated 9.2 million to 15.8 million children are considered “at-risk” in this country.<sup>1</sup> These youth are at-risk because they are at a crossroads: one road leads to a successful transition to adulthood, the other to dependency and negative long-term consequences. Youth typically considered at-risk are more likely to become pregnant, use drugs and/or alcohol, drop out of school, be unemployed, engage in violence, and face an increased likelihood of a host of mental health problems.

Despite perceptions that “nothing works” for at-risk youth, research is now identifying effective program principles and approaches in working with at-risk youth. Furthermore, funding opportunities under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Welfare-to-Work (WtW) are available to states to initiate and develop activities to support these new, effective programs.

The most successful program models are those that employ the following principles: holistic approaches that promote youth development; collaborative efforts among different agencies that provide services to at-risk youth; integration of family, peers, and the community in treatment; enhanced adult and youth interaction through such things as mentoring, work-based learning, and links to the private sector; and community-service and service-learning activities.

These new youth development approaches represent a major cultural shift in designing youth programs. In particular, the new approaches involve a movement from remediation to prevention; from targeting only at-risk youth to targeting all youth; from focusing only on problem behaviors to building on the strengths of youth; from addressing single problems to addressing a broad array of youth needs; from one agency/one discipline approaches to interagency/interdisciplinary strategies; and from removing or treating youth outside the context of the community to working with youth in the context of their own environment.

Four states—Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New York—are making strides in promoting youth development policy. Although each state’s plan is unique, each aims to:

- enhance relationships between state and local government to develop and implement youth development policies and programs;

- build on existing youth collaborations and organizations;
- articulate a statewide policy and understanding of youth development;
- develop and implement statewide training programs based on effective principles and best practices of youth development;
- involve youth in planning; and
- evaluate results.

### **What is Youth Development?**

The main goal of positive youth development strategies is to help youth become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Youth development strategies help youth become healthy and productive adults by supporting the development of attitudes, behaviors, and skills that enable them to succeed as parents, citizens, and workers. These strategies also help prevent serious problems such as teen pregnancy, violence, and dropping out of school.

### ***Who are at-risk youth?***

While estimating the number of at-risk youth is difficult, recent research suggests that between 9 million and 16 million children in this nation are growing up with disadvantages that “limit the development of their potential, compromise their health, impair their sense of self, and generally restrict their chances for successful lives.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, youth who do not have opportunities to develop positive attitudes and behaviors and to test them within a supportive environment are at risk of a host of antisocial and negative behaviors. Often these youth live in high-poverty areas and do not receive attention until after they engage in negative behaviors.

The term “at-risk” is misleading because it encompasses a wide array of youth who have already begun to engage in negative and high-risk activities. At-risk youth may be youth who are too old to be served by the traditional child welfare system or too young to be identified or served by the adult systems. As a result, they may not be receiving adequate services or even being served at all. Alternatively, at-risk youth may already be receiving services through one or more youth serving system. In either case, these youth potentially represent the next generation of teen parents, welfare recipients, prisoners, single or absent parents, and/or unemployed young adults.

### ***Effective Program Principles for Working with At-Risk Youth***

Youth are at an extremely crucial period in their psychosocial and physical development. It is a time when interventions can be very successful in risk reduction and positive development. Effective programs can help youth not yet involved in negative behaviors avoid them before these behaviors develop into patterns, before there are serious consequences to their actions, and before they require more expensive, and often less effective, “deeper end” services. Effective programs also address the needs of youth already involved in negative behaviors, youth referred to as “beyond risk.”

The following section, although not exhaustive, highlights principles of best practices for serving at-risk youth.<sup>3</sup>

- **Holistic/Multimodal approaches.** Approaches for effective treatment recognize different learning styles and developmental stages; are balanced and holistic, addressing the full range of youth needs; address both risk and protective factors (protective factors are those individual characteristics that keep youth from engaging in high-risk behavior); and integrate education, health, mental health, employment, vocational, and substance-abuse services, as appropriate.

- **Collaborative efforts.** Best practice initiatives are those that fashion formal and informal collaborative relationships among community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, social services, workforce investment systems, law enforcement, mental health, juvenile justice, and education agencies. These different entities can deliver more comprehensive and seamless services, provide more effective supportive and follow-up services, and leverage more resources.
- **Integration of family, peers, and community.** Programs that integrate the support of the two most significant groups in youth's lives—family members and peers—along with the broader community, can help provide the reinforcement and consistency that promotes long-term development and learning.
- **Positive adult and youth interaction.** Research indicates that programs that foster structured relationships between adults and youth have more positive outcomes for youth. Adult-youth interactions can be formalized through mentoring programs, work experiences, and community service projects.
- **Work-based learning/links to the private sector.** Programs that foster linkages with employers provide a tangible relationship between youth and “the real world.” In addition, linkages to the private sector can also potentially add long-term resources to programs.<sup>4</sup> Employer councils, advisory committees, and other such links can expand intern or apprenticeship opportunities.
- **Community service/service-learning activities.** Community service provides a unique experience for at-risk youth by allowing them to give something meaningful back to their community. In addition to providing hands-on experience, community-service demonstrates that youth are resources and have something substantial to contribute to society. Examples of community-service projects include tutoring children, providing support for the elderly, and organizing environmental events. Examples of programs that have successfully integrated community service into their programming include Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Youth Serve America, and America's Promise.

While there are competing conceptual frameworks of youth development, there is consensus on at least two basic tenets of youth development: the importance of positive development, and place-based and community-based development.<sup>5</sup>

**Positive development.** Perhaps the most important feature of youth development strategies is their focus on growth versus remediation. This positive focus broadens the nature of treatment by allowing development to occur in areas other than the presenting problem. Successful models address the broader developmental needs of youth in a more holistic way than models that focus on youth problems and weaknesses. Table 1 contains some of the essential elements for this type of positive development.

**Community-based and place-based development.** Youth-development approaches aim to strengthen communities' capacity to better support the healthy maturation of young people. Where youth live, what their communities are like, who their contemporaries are, and what the general climate is like in their neighborhoods—including rates of poverty, crime, school dropout rates—have significant impacts on development.

According to the Social Development Research Group (SDRG), youth development strategies should be anchored in an understanding of the risk factors of a given community, such as rates of substance abuse, violence, and educational quality. By understanding the risk factors in a community, policymakers can accurately determine the needs of a given community and plan accordingly.

### ***Positive Youth Development Approaches***

Youth development approaches represent a major cultural shift in youth policy and practice. Positive youth development approaches engage youth, their families, schools, the faith community, and other institutions in building the competencies and connections that enable youth to become successful adults. In particular, the most significant changes include movement from:

- **Remediation to prevention.** Rather than reacting to problem behaviors, positive youth development strategies aim to be proactive by adopting preventive strategies that seek to prevent problem behaviors.
- **Targeted programs to universal programs.** Positive youth development strategies address the needs of all youth, not just problem or at-risk youth.
- **Deficit-focused strategies to asset-based approaches.** Successful youth development approaches strive to build on the strengths of youth rather than focusing only on problem behaviors. This ties back to the fact that the more assets or strengths youth have, the less likely they are to engage in negative behaviors.
- **Single-problem solutions to holistic, more universal approaches.** Successful youth development strategies are comprehensive in their approach and address a broad array of youth needs.
- **One-agency/one-discipline approaches to interagency/interdisciplinary strategies.** This holistic approach establishes more comprehensive and collaborative systemic approaches that cut across traditional disciplines (i.e., education, substance abuse, mental health, etc.).

**Table 1.  
Essential Elements for Positive Youth Development Programs**

1. Promotes bonding
2. Fosters resilience
3. Promotes social competence
4. Promotes emotional competence
5. Promotes cognitive competence
6. Promotes behavioral competence
7. Promotes moral competence
8. Fosters self-determination
9. Fosters spirituality
10. Fosters self-efficacy
11. Fosters clear and positive identity
12. Foster belief in the future
13. Provides recognition for positive behavior
14. Provides opportunities for prosocial involvement
15. Fosters prosocial norms

Source: *Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs*, Social Development Research Group, University of Washington, School of Social Work, Seattle, Washington, June 1999.

### **Current Funding Opportunities Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Welfare-to-Work (WtW)**

There are many opportunities for states to develop and implement programs to address the needs of at-risk youth using WIA, TANF, and WtW funds. For example, WIA allows states to develop specific strategies and fund programs designed to meet the employment needs of at-risk youth who are both in and out-of-school. WIA's emphasis on local youth councils and involving other youth-serving agencies provides a way for states to implement more integrated strategies for at-risk youth. States also have the option to use state reserve funds to support a range of priority activities, including for at-risk youth.

TANF allows for a wide array of services for at-risk youth, including those designed to reduce out-of-wedlock births and to promote responsible parenting. Initial implementation of TANF focused on helping needy parents find jobs and on providing other supports to these parents, such as case management, work activities, child care, and transportation. However, as caseloads have dropped dramatically—freeing up resources previously devoted to cash assistance—states have an opportunity to more fully explore the range of activities that can be undertaken with TANF funds, including those for at-risk youth.

Finally, WtW can be used to support activities to assist hard-to-employ at-risk youth. Although the enacted eligibility requirements identifying at-risk youth under each of these funding sources may be

distinct as written in the respective legislation, some at-risk youth may be eligible under more than one source.

More information on accessing federal funding under WIA, TANF, and WtW, for at-risk youth is available on NGA's Web site at <http://www.nga.org/JuvenileJustice/wiafacts.pdf>, <http://www.nga.org/JuvenileJustice/tanfopps.pdf> and, <http://www.nga.org/JuvenileJustice/wtwfacts.pdf>.

### **State Initiatives<sup>6</sup>**

In September 1998, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Families and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) awarded State Youth Development Collaboration Projects grants to nine states (Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New York, and Oregon) to develop and support innovative youth development strategies.

These grants were designed to enable states to develop or strengthen youth development strategies and target all youth, including youth in at-risk situations such as runaway and homeless youth, youth leaving the foster care system, abused and neglected children, and other youth served by the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Four states (Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New York) are making strides in promoting youth development policy. Although each state's plan is unique, each aims to:

- enhance relationships between state and local government to develop and implement youth development policies and programs;
- build on existing youth collaborations and organizations;
- articulate a statewide policy and understanding of youth development;
- develop and implement statewide training programs based on effective principles and best practices of youth development;
- involve youth in planning; and
- evaluate results.

This section highlights the activities these states to illustrate how state policy can support youth development strategies.<sup>7</sup> Complete state plans are available on the Web at <http://www.ncfy.com/state-yd-collab.htm>.

#### ***Iowa***

Iowa's Youth Development Collaboration Project focuses on producing broad, positive change in youth-serving systems. To build on the state's existing youth development initiatives, the program aims to replace fragmented, deficit-driven youth policies and programs at the state level with a coordinated youth development approach. It also works to build the capacity of local communities to use a positive youth development approach in providing youth services.

The project is administered through the Iowa Division of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning. This agency conducts research, planning, evaluation, and analysis. It also administers a variety of federal and state grant programs that support state and local efforts to prevent juvenile crime and improve the juvenile justice system.

Some project activities to date include the following.

- Iowa has expanded state discussion on youth development by enhancing the activity and membership of the Youth Development State Task Force. This task force is a collaborative group of representatives from nearly 50 state agencies and the FYSB state grantees. The task force meets monthly to discuss promoting youth development strategies and policies and to provide updates on ongoing state efforts.
- Iowa has established the Iowa Youth Development Event Calendar. As a product of the task force, the calendar highlights the many different youth development activities taking place statewide and is available to youth, policymakers, practitioners, and the public.
- Iowa has published a leadership development guide for junior and senior high school-age youth. This guide features state and national youth development training opportunities available for Iowa youth.
- The project is constructing a state youth development Web site that will link the different agencies and programs involved in youth development activities within the state. The site will feature the event calendar and will have areas within the Web site designed specifically for agencies, local communities, providers, and youth.
- To involve youth in state policy decisionmaking, Iowa has also created the 2010 Youth Impact Program. This process initiative connects youth directly with Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack's strategic planning council, which focuses on broad long-range visions of state policy. By involving youth in this process, Iowa aims to ensure that the long-range state plan has youth input.
- A subcommittee of the task force is organizing a series of online forums using Iowa's Communication Network (ICN). ICN is a component of the state's communication infrastructure that links sites throughout the state via video and audio. The first of these forums occurred Spring 2000 and brought together youth, policymakers, and other leaders in a discussion about youth development leadership activities.
- Iowa is developing a youth development results framework. This outcome-based framework is a step towards developing a more comprehensive state youth development policy. The framework is broken into results areas, operational components, and potential indicators, and is being developed with various state agencies, providers, and programs.
- Iowa is also forming a peer-to-peer training and technical assistance network. This network will provide training and assistance to state and local agencies and programs on the principles and practices of youth development.

**Contact:** Richard Moore, Division Administrator, Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning, Department of Human Rights, Lucas State Office Building, Des Moines, Iowa 50319; Phone: 515/242-5816; Fax: 515/242-6119; E-mail: Dick.moore@cjjp.state.ia.us.

### ***Maryland***

Maryland's State Youth Development Collaboration Project promotes the adoption of youth development practices of state youth-serving agencies and community-based organizations by enhancing statewide collaborative efforts to improve outcomes for youth through youth development; strengthening the role of state and local partnerships in developing, monitoring, and evaluating programs and policies impacting children and youth; and promoting and facilitating communication and coordination between youth-related statewide collaborations and youth-serving community-based organizations.

The project is a collaborative effort between the state's Departments of Education, Health and Mental Hygiene, Housing and Community Development, Human Resources, and Juvenile Justice, the Governor's Office on Children, Youth, and Families; Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Children and Youth; and FYSB grantees within the state. The Department of Human Resources, which is responsible for administering the state's social service and welfare programs, administers this program. The project also includes youth in its decisionmaking processes.

Project activities to date include the following.

- The project facilitated and conducted a series of training sessions across the state specifically designed to educate youth workers from state agencies and community-based organizations on incorporating the principles of youth development into direct service and programming.
- In conjunction with its partner state agencies, the project supported a statewide conference on school safety, “Stand Up For Safe Schools.” The conference was designed for students, service providers, educators, and law enforcement, and it examined issues of school safety and violence prevention and reduction efforts.
- Maryland is facilitating a series of youth leadership training sessions. These sessions provide youth with opportunities to develop leadership skills as a component of youth development.
- Maryland is preparing to conduct a needs assessment of statewide youth development programs and policies. The results of this assessment will be used to conduct a gap analysis of services and programs across the state and for long-term planning.
- With its partner agencies, the Maryland project is developing a comprehensive resource guide on state youth-serving programs. This guide will be a central resource of youth-serving agencies and programs from the state, focusing on programs that employ a youth development approach.

**Contact:** Daniece C. Dennis, Youth Development Coordinator, Maryland Department of Human Resources, 311 West Saratoga Street, Room 575, Baltimore, MD 21201; Phone: 410/767-7818; Fax: 410/333-0127; E-mail: DDENNIS@DHR.STATE.MD.US.

### ***Massachusetts***

Massachusetts’ Youth Development State Collaboration Project is operated through the Executive Office of Health and Human Services’ (EOHHS) Office of Youth Development (OYD). OYD aims to establish and support the implementation of effective youth development strategies at the state and local levels. Its mission includes addressing the needs of youth transitioning to or from state agencies. To support the activities of OYD, Massachusetts created a Youth Development Advisory Council (YDAC). YDAC’s role is to advise EOHHS about youth development policy and to assist in the implementation of state initiatives. Membership of the council includes most state youth-serving agencies, community agencies, advocates, law enforcement, and youth.

Highlights of Massachusetts’ activities to date include the following.

- OYD organized a state team to support Brockton Private Industry Council’s successful application to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) for an \$18-million Youth Opportunity Grant. The team included representatives from the Departments of Social Services, Youth Services, Mental Health, Public Health and Transitional Assistance. OYD is providing technical support to Brockton in implementing the grant.
- In March 2000, EOHHS released \$1 million in state youth development grants, which support a youth development approach to services that target delinquency prevention; leadership and character development; technology training; job training; drug, alcohol, and teen pregnancy prevention; and educational enhancement.
- OYD is cofunding and providing technical support to Governor Argeo Paul Cellucci’s school violence technical assistance forums. These regional forums provide a range of violence prevention training opportunities for teachers, educational administrators, law enforcement agencies, community agencies, and students.
- YDAC is cosponsoring a series of training sessions for child protective services and juvenile justice staff regarding implementation of WIA. The initiative will increase access to state education and job development resources for youth in state custody.

- OYD helped develop of a \$154,000 teen-dating violence education request for response (RFR). The money will fund a series of teen-dating violence initiatives developed for and with youth.
- In December 1999, YDAC partnered with the Department of Education's Statewide Student Council to conduct a statewide holiday gift drive that collected several hundred gifts for state foster children.
- OYD collaboratively sponsored "Teen Talk," a forum of approximately 70 youth who developed recommendations for policymakers to improve the safety of school environments.
- OYD participates as a member of Massachusetts' Housing and Shelter Alliance Youth Subcommittee. It cosponsored a one-night homeless youth census count, and it is working with the University of Massachusetts' McCormack Institute to develop more accurate, unduplicated counts of homeless youth.
- YDAC has formed a "Transition Team" subcommittee to support youth transitioning to and from state agencies, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of homeless and runaway youth. The subcommittee consists of FYSB grantees and state youth-serving agencies. The subcommittee will provide technical support and recommendations to state and community agencies regarding health-care outreach, education and job development initiatives, and allocation of federal residential and housing resources.
- OYD participates in a working group on discharge planning chaired by the undersecretary of administration and finance. This multiagency group is reviewing state discharge policies and is developing recommendations regarding homeless prevention.

**Contact:** Glenn Daly, Director, Youth Development Collaboration Project, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Executive Office of Health and Human Services, One Ashburton Place, Room 1109, Boston, MA 02108; Phone: 617/727-7600, Ext. 302; Fax: 617/727-5134; E-mail: glenn.daly@state.ma.us.

### *New York*

The lead agency for youth development in New York is The New York State Office of Children and Family Services' (OCFS) Bureau of Strategic Planning. This office administers the state's Youth Development and Delinquency Prevention program, which is implemented through county and municipal youth bureaus. Youth bureaus—which exist in nearly all the state's counties and in many municipalities—plan, coordinate, and develop services that meet the needs of all young people under age 21.<sup>8</sup>

Some of OCFS's ongoing activities include the following.

- OCFS is promoting understanding of youth development through the advancing youth development curriculum, a training program for frontline youth workers. OCFS, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and the Association of New York State Youth Bureaus are collaborating to offer this training statewide. To date, 125 facilitators in 31 interagency county teams have been trained.
- Through the Adolescent Project Team, a component of Partners for Children, OCFS collaboratively developed or supported the development of requests for proposals (RFPs) that include youth development principles. The Adolescent Project Team includes state agencies, statewide private organizations and universities. RFPs have included funding for an initiative to promote after-school programming, for efforts to reduce school violence, and for programs designed to strengthen youth, families, schools, and communities.
- Significant steps have been taken toward developing a state youth development policy. Through a series of meetings, a draft youth development discussion paper has been written and is being reviewed by stakeholders across the state. A final version has not been issued.



- OCFS is funding and supporting the Integrated County Planning initiative, a five-year 15-county effort designed to support county planning that comprehensively assesses the needs and strengths of communities.
- OCFS also supports Safe and Accessible Places to Learn and Play, an initiative that encourages collaboration among youth bureaus, libraries, museums, and religious organizations to make facilities more available to youth during nonschool hours, weekends, holidays, and over the summer.
- OCFS also supports the Careers in Law Enforcement Program, a program designed to increase the number of inner-city youth interested in a career in law enforcement and to enhance public safety through improved relations between at-risk youth and law enforcement. OCFS plans to have 24 sites throughout the state engaging approximately 480 youth.

**Contact:** Sally Herrick, Assistant Commissioner, Office of Children and Family Services, State of New York, 52 Washington Street, Room 120, Renesselaer, NY 12144; Phone: 518/473-8455; Fax: 518/473-8455; E-mail: kk7701@dfa.state.ny.us.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *1999 Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being* (Baltimore, Md.: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> While much research has been conducted on best practices for youth programs, several resources are worth noting: The American Youth Policy Forum's *More Things that DO Make a Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices Volume II*; the National Youth Employment Coalition's *PEPNet '99 Lessons Learned From 51 Effective Youth Employment Initiatives*; The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*; and The Sar Levitan's Center for Social Policy Studies' *Making Connections: Youth Program Strategies for a Generation of Challenge, Commendable Examples from The Levitan Youth Policy Network*. The principles contained in this section were drawn from these resources.

<sup>4</sup> According to John Savage from the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, temporary employment programs do not significantly improve outcomes for youth. For employment programs to be effective in improving outcomes, they must be within a larger and supportive context. (Adapted from a forum on "Addressing the Training and Employment Needs of Youth with Mental Health Disabilities in the Juvenile Justice System," March 3-4, 2000.)

<sup>5</sup> James B. Hyman, *Spheres of Influence: A Strategic Synthesis and Framework for Community Youth Development* (Baltimore, Md.: Annie E. Casey Foundation, June 1999), 15.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the FYSB program described here, the NGA Center for Best Practices recently established the Youth Policy Network. The network is a 10 state, two-year initiative designed to help states improve outcomes for youth through youth development strategies. Network states include Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

<sup>7</sup> These states' plans were adapted from state plans featured on the National Clearinghouse for Youth (NCFY) Web site.

<sup>8</sup> Another important feature to New York's overall youth development strategy is a statewide policy paper, *New York Youth—The Key to Our Economic and Social Future: A Blueprint for State and Local Action*, which

articulates New York's vision for youth and youth development. The blueprint, endorsed by the heads of the Governor's Economic Development, Health and Human Services, and Criminal Justice cabinets, has five goals:

1. Expand opportunities for youth leadership and opportunities for youth to serve as problemsolvers.
2. Strengthen and support the capability of families to care for their children.
3. Build community opportunities for positive youth development through neighborhoods, schools, parks, and religious facilities.
4. Mobilize resources (public, private, state, and local) through collaborations and partnerships among business, the media, and civic organizations.
5. Support programs that are measurably effective and promote the most successful approaches.