Listening Session Summary: Focus on Juvenile Justice

Location: Orlando, FL
Date: November 16, 2010

Approach

The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP) hosted a series of listening sessions across the country to gather input from stakeholders to inform the development of an overarching strategic plan for federal youth policy. In order to go in depth on specific issues, each listening session had a special focus topic, such as juvenile justice, housing, positive youth development, and others. Sessions lasted approximately four hours and were led by an experienced facilitator.

Participants

See Appendix A for participant information.

Questions and Responses

Summaries of participants' responses follow each of the questions below.

What is the single most important thing we could do to make a difference in the lives of youth, related to juvenile justice?

- Youth need to know that **adults listen to them and care about them as individual people.**
- Youth need **connections with opportunities, resources, and trusted adults** in their community.
- Youth need **opportunities to achieve milestones** toward becoming positive members of society (e.g., education, vocational skills).
- Programs must be **proactive** in engaging youth, rather than expecting youth to come to them.
- **Families need to be engaged** in youth services, including treatment.
- **Families need to be strengthened** and provided with better resources to meet their needs.
- Youth leaving the juvenile justice system often have significant expenses (e.g., dependent care, restitution fees), but **too few legitimate jobs are available** to them.
- A substantial increase is needed in **funding for prevention and early intervention**, including collaborative efforts to **identify and intervene with youth at exceptional risk.**
- Teachers need more training regarding how to **recognize children in need of additional support.**
- Youth face **barriers to improving their lives** due to policies opening juvenile justice records (and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to have a record).
- **Laws prohibiting drug offenders from living in public housing** can leave families choosing between homelessness or banishing their child when he/she is released from incarceration.
- **Burdensome bureaucratic requirements** take away time staff could spend on direct services.

What are the needs of youth (up to the age of 24) related to juvenile justice?

- Youth need to **learn about the potential consequences of their actions** from an early age.
- Youth involved with the juvenile justice system (and their families and social workers) need **better information regarding legal options**, and how a given record impacts that young person.
- Only a fraction of youth with identified mental health needs are able to **access services**, and many don't get services until they have entered the juvenile justice system and already have a record.

- Law enforcement needs better training on how to recognize mental health issues among youth, and how to **divert youth with mental health concerns away from the justice system.**
- Youth with identified concerns need a **sufficient level of care** to address those concerns.
- Youth need appropriate treatments to **address special issues** (e.g., abuse, poverty).
- Youth need **stability**, with services located in their communities.
- Providers need **better information regarding services** available in the community.
- There is **insufficient follow-up, feedback, and accountability** for youth referred to services.
- Child welfare systems are focusing more on young children, **denying services to older youth**.

What are effective programs and strategies regarding juvenile justice? Are there program or policy gaps?

Effective programs and strategies
- There is substantial evidence that **positive youth development approaches** are effective.
- Youth are more engaged in education when they feel like teachers are **available, attentive, and actively support them** to achieve their goals.
- Healthy Start and Healthy Families provide valuable **prevention and early intervention**.
- Youth benefit from **collaborative and wraparound approaches** to intervention (e.g., Oaks and Wraparound Orange County programs, Teen-Family Conferencing model).
- **Place-based approaches** allow comprehensive support to be focused on the communities with the most need (e.g., Harlem Kids' Zone, Paramore Kidz Zone).
- Programs such as Keeping Up and Man Up **support youth suspended from school.**
- **Mentoring** can prevent youth from entering the juvenile justice system (e.g., Ready to Achieve Mentoring Program).
- **Youth in transition to independent living** benefit from being able to identify their support team (e.g., Casey Foundation).
- Programs such as Prison Fellowship take a **family-based approach** to helping youth reintegrate into their families and communities after release from prison.
- The Mad Dads program **engages the community** to deter crime and connect people to services.

Program or policy gaps
- A **negative media image** of youth influences how they are treated in schools and communities.
- Zero tolerance policies result in **disproportionate responses and excessive consequences** for minor acts of misbehavior.
- There is **too much red tape** involved in applications for services, and applicants can face additional challenges to getting services if they are in unstable living situations.
- There can be **barriers for young people to get documentation** they need for independent living (e.g., documents needed for a driver's license, social security card, etc.).
- Policymakers need to see **cost-benefits analyses to gain their buy-in** for prevention.
- More human resources are needed to **provide linguistically and culturally appropriate** services.
- Agency staff can have **caseloads that are far too high** for them to provide adequate services.

Do specific populations of youth have disproportionately poor outcomes related to the topics we have addressed? What are some ways to best serve these populations?

Populations with disproportionately poor outcomes
- Youth start to lose needed services and supports after about age 16.
- Youth who become involved across multiple service systems have worse outcomes.
- Many students who show significant behavioral needs by age eight will be incarcerated later in life.

- It is difficult to engage or motivate young people who have no vision or hope for their future.
- Youth whose families are in the military can be affected by family member deployment.

Ways to best serve these populations
- **Increase inter-agency communication** to provide better transitions for youth moving between systems/settings.
- **Adopt an inter-generational approach** to addressing issues (e.g., homelessness) instead of focusing only on the generation with the current problem.
- **Support families** to help their youth develop a vision for the future, addressing their more immediate concerns if those are creating a barrier to long-range thinking.
- **Learn more about how youth are affected** when family members undergo military deployment.

What programs really make a difference in the lives of youth? How do you know this?

- Youth benefit from getting involved in **extracurricular activities** in an area of interest to them, and from **safe and flexible recreational programming with extended hours.**
- Youth have better outcomes when they have been **empowered and develop self-esteem, pro-social skills, and a good character.**
- Youth need **physical and emotional safety**, and adults who understand youth development.
- Girls benefit from **gender-sensitive programming** that builds positive, appropriate relationships.
- **Multilingual educational interventions** that offer extra support to all struggling students improve test scores, attendance, and student-teacher relationships.
- Comprehensive intervention programs are effective because they **address multiple risk and protective factors.**
- When **parents become involved as partners** in addressing children's infractions at school, the rate of reoffending drops significantly.
- The National Mentor Network has shown that **matching caring adults with youth** decreases risk behaviors and increases positive outcomes.
- Youth benefit when **fathers in prison** participate in programming, as in Florida's Manhood Series.

What are the barriers to collaborating on youth outcomes, and how can these barriers be removed?

Barriers to collaboration
- **Funding restrictions** discourage collaboration because it is too difficult to meet criteria.
- **Large caseloads** overload staff.
- Staff is hampered by **excessive and repetitive paperwork and review** requirements.
- **Agencies focus on what is best for them**, not what is best for their clients.
- Youth-serving systems **lack a set of shared desired outcomes**.
- There is a lack of information available regarding the **evidence base for what works**.

How these barriers could be removed
- **Restructure funding** to make collaboration easier.
- Create **umbrella organizations** that obtain funds to be used across agencies based on need.
- Use **creative approaches** (e.g., university partnerships) to increase staff time within budget.
- Provide better information to policymakers and to the public regarding the **cost vs. benefit of investment in prevention and intervention.**
- Adopt an **outcomes oriented accountability system** in place of the process-oriented system. Ask consumers and line providers of services for their feedback.

What types of initiatives could promote collaboration and improve outcomes for youth?

- Examine systems to understand poor outcomes, instead of focusing on the deficits of the youth.
- Underpaid staff will not be able to produce good results.
- Interagency agreements that involve face-to-face contact help people stay engaged.

What can be done for all youth (not just those directly benefiting from programs) in order to use resources effectively?

- Schools should **be selective regarding what they ask of parents** so parents are not overwhelmed.
- Schools and families need **clearer guidelines** regarding what constitutes bullying and how it will be addressed.
- Allow youth to take part in whatever programming interests them. **Remove restrictions** that result in young people being turned away.
- **Track use of funds** at the individual level to identify waste and learn if the used funds led to intended outcomes.

What are your ideas for federal policy to improve the coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency of programs affecting youth?

- Break down barriers between departments (e.g., human services, education) to **focus on the whole child.**
- **Stop labeling** young people when they become engaged with services.
- **Stop criminalizing** minor misbehavior.
- **Reduce burdensome paperwork and high caseloads** so program staff has more time for clients.
- **Eliminate arbitrary time limits on funding**—focus on the best interests of clients.
- **Focus accountability on positive change and outcomes** rather than on processes.
- Provide better **information to service providers** regarding other resources available for clients.
- Provide youth with more **opportunities to develop vocational skills** in their areas of interest.
- Support young people to use **interventions as a springboard for positive change.**
- Invest in **family stabilization and preservation.**
- Develop **comprehensive intake forms** that are common across agencies.
- Encourage agencies to share resources and **collaborate to achieve desired outcomes**.
- **Help smaller programs** that are effective to get the word out to the public.
- Focus on **empowerment** rather than regulation.
- **Fund collaborations** to create buy-in.
- Adults need to **let young people know that they care** about them.
- **Pool funding across agencies**, and offer more waivers and carve-outs.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS from Region IV (Orlando, FL)

Participating organizations*:
- Home Builders Institute
- Henkels & McCoy
- Redeeming Light Community Services
- Health Council of East Central Florida
- Orange County Public Schools
- Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children
- Meridian Associates Counseling and Prevention Services, Inc.
- Orlando Regional Medical Center
- Helping Others Make the Effort
- PACE Center for Girls
- Intervention Services, Inc.
- Oaks Community Intervention Program
- Power Promise Organization
- Florida Crown Workforce Board
- Teen Xpress/Orlando Health
- Florida A&M University
- Positive Pathways Transition Center, Orange County Public Schools
- National Center for Prevention and Research Solutions
- United Action for Youth
- Volusia County Schools
- Workforce Central Florida
- Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

*Note: Participant information is only provided for participants who registered for the session and may not represent all organizations that were present.