



ROLES FOR YOUTH IN SYSTEMS OF CARE

This issue of *Focal Point* focuses on youth and young adults taking on significant roles in the planning, evaluation, and provision of mental health and other human services for youth and children. The initial momentum for this issue came from the enthusiastic response which greeted a plenary panel session devoted to the same topic, which took place during the RTC's 2000 Building on Family Strengths Conference. During the panel session, we heard from young people—both consumers and past consumers of services—who were having a significant impact on the services they received and/or the services received by other young people and their families. We also heard from adult panelists who were partnering with the young people to craft, facilitate, and/or support these roles.

This issue starts off with an article by youth panel moderator Juliet LaMonaca, who summarizes the panelists' descriptions of the successes and the difficulties they encountered as they worked to create roles for youth at the local, state, and/or national level (a complete transcript is available on our *Interact!* web pages). Juliet Choi's article provides a description of further possibilities for roles for youth at different levels of the service system. Several of the articles included in this issue discuss the rationale for developing these roles for young people, arguing that allowing youth to have a voice in systems of care can improve programs and outcomes for youth, and can also build young people's leadership skills, self-confidence, and sense of commitment and purpose. The articles from the Community Network for Youth Development and the National Network for Youth are perhaps the most explicit statements of how this approach to partnering with youth represents a logical extension of the move away from deficit-based models of mental illness, and toward strengths-based models of youth development. George Maciejewski points out in his article that the essential elements of this philosophy have been around for at least a century. In his moving reflections on the youth panel, he wonders if perhaps now is the time when the sacrifices of early advocates will be redeemed through real progress in empowering children.

Several of the articles are cautionary in citing the difficulties that accompany the efforts of youth and adults to partner together. The authors point out that it is not

easy for adults to give up a meaningful measure of power and resources, and to allow their own agendas to be shaped significantly by the agendas of youth partners. Difficulties also arise for adults and youth—whose beliefs, values, and experiences may well diverge in many areas—to come together through the beliefs, values, and experiences which they *do* hold in common, so that they can engage in productive work towards shared goals. In the discussions that we have had with people across the country around this topic, we have heard of many efforts which have floundered, and others which have been abandoned.

During the youth panel, a sense of real excitement filled the room, as the presenters shared their vision and their experiences of the partnerships they had built. Yet there were also several sobering reminders of the difficulties and pitfalls that can derail such efforts. Panelists and audience members collaborated to produce a list of the benefits that can result from successful partnering with youth in services, and another list of the obstacles that prevent partnerships from working. The list of barriers was almost twice as long as the list of benefits. A bit later in the session, the panelists asked members of the audience to raise their hands if they supported the idea of empowering youth in the types of roles we had been discussing. Of the more than 300 people in the room, nearly every one raised a hand. The panelists then asked for the hands of people whose organizations actually supported youth in these roles. Four or five hands stayed up—a deflating surprise. But it was the general absence of youth in the audience that was perhaps the most obvious reminder that excitement and optimism are only the first steps in a process of change.

Another step is being taken when individual young people are able to speak with a powerful voice in planning their own services, perhaps by participating actively on their own IEP or wraparound planning team. In their articles, both Della Hughes and “Yoooper” Ruth Alman provide examples of the benefits which come to young people who are encouraged to use their voice in wraparound planning. Both authors point out that it is not just the youth who potentially stand to gain from this sort of participation, as both describe some valuable lessons

that adults have learned from partnering with youth on wraparound teams.

Within service providing and advocacy organizations, youth can have significant impact on programs or services as they work in paid staff or volunteer positions and/or serve on committees or boards of directors. In these roles we have seen youth partnering with adults in designing or evaluating programs, setting organizational priorities, hiring and evaluating staff, and providing training both within and outside of the organization. In this issue, Lauren Stevenson provides examples of roles for youth at several of the grantee sites supported by the Center for Mental Health Services' Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program.

Several other articles detail the experiences of adults and youth who have partnered at the organizational level. Cheri Villines describes how working in partnership with a teen advisory board has helped a residential program become more responsive and more effective in providing services to its youth clients. Michelle Chalmers describes how involving youth has helped Growing Home move closer to its vision of itself as an organization using a strengths-based approach to positive youth development for young people in therapeutic foster care. Often, as Martan Mendenhall points out, young people's first priority when assuming leadership roles is to advocate for further increases in youth voice and youth roles in the organization. Another top priority, fully recognized by the authors describing the activities of the Beacon Initiative and Youth Millennium 2000, is the desire for young people who have received services to have opportunities to "give back" through community service.

These and other organizations are also settings in which youth provide services to peers, as peer counselors, advocates, mentors, or mediators. The authors from the National Network for Youth describe how the commitment to youth partnerships at Huckleberry House has led to the creation of part-time staff positions for youth counselors, equal to adult part-time positions in training, responsibilities, and wages. Youth Millennium 2000 and its COPES units provide opportunities for youth who have made progress in managing their mental health symptoms to serve as mentors to other youth in the program.

Organizations partnering with youth have developed unique materials and services which they are able to share with other groups. Chalmers writes that Growing Home has two publications which were

developed through partnerships with youth, and which are based on the experiences and expertise of youth who have been in foster care. One of these publications is a guide for youth entering foster care which includes information about how the child welfare system works and what to expect from courts and service providers. The second publication is a journal and guide to be used as a tool for youth to build the strengths and vision they need as they transition from foster care to independence. The Teen Board at the Deveraux residential program in Georgia has shared with numerous other groups several of the products of its work, including their consumer satisfaction survey, and the consumer friendly handbook given to young people as they enter the facility.

Other organizations have developed valuable materials as a product of youth-led research. Jonathan London's article details how Youth in Focus provides training and support for youth-led research, and describes the impact that the products of youth-led research have had on plans for juvenile justice reforms in San Francisco, as well as on other programs and policies in northern California. *Time to Listen*, a book based on research conducted by young people receiving mental health services in the United Kingdom and reviewed on our website, provides insight into the perspectives of youth consumers. Equally important, the book also describes in some detail the challenges which the project faced in the course of partnering with youth in the research process. *Mauve*, a CD-ROM produced by youth researchers in Canada, is also reviewed on our website, as are several other products of youth-led research.

Taken together, these articles tell a wide variety of success stories about voices for youth in systems of care. They also represent knowledge and experience gained from sustained efforts to develop partnerships between adults and young people. People who have made such efforts often express the wish that more information and more resources had been available to them when they started. We hope that this issue of *Focal Point/ Interact!* will prove useful in this regard.

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