



## BEING OUR OWN ADVOCATES

### *Youth and Young Adults as Partners in Planning, Evaluation and Policy Making*

*Being Our Own Advocates* was a session dedicated to discussing different ways that young people are involved on a local, state, and national level. Four youth and two adult representatives talked about the variety of ways they are involved in different systems of care and policy making.

Representatives from the Devereaux Georgia

Treatment Network talked about their Teen Advisory Board, which helps develop policies at a residential treatment facility. LeRoy McLeod, the current chair of the Teen Advisory Board, explained the Board is a place where any issues that involve youth at the facility can be addressed. They started by involving the youth in helping to create a client satisfaction survey. They found the youth had a number of things they wished to address regarding their treatment. Youth involved on the Teen Advisory Board have helped rewrite the student handbook so that it is more user-friendly. They also discuss issues of day-to-day living at the treatment facility—everything, from which movies should be shown, to concerns about religion.

Cheri Villines, one of the staff liaisons to the Teen Advisory Board, acknowledged there have been some challenges getting the staff to support the Board. Staff thought the Board was a great idea until the youth actually wanted to start making changes at the facility. Many staff members believe youth are not able to understand how a board operates and that the procedures will be too overwhelming for them. There is also the presumption that youth are too disruptive to be involved in policy making. They have tried to change that stereotype by training the youth and giving them the skills they need to participate effectively. Cheri's philosophy is that the staff must "assume that the youth are experts in solving problem dilemmas."



Involvement with the Teen Advisory Board empowers youth and helps them become more involved in their treatment programs. The Board is run like any other board meeting, thereby providing the skills necessary for the youth to participate on any other board. Antonio Chambers, a former chairperson, discussed how serving on the Board helped

prepare him to serve on boards in other organizations such as the Georgia Parent Support Network, and the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health Board of Directors. It also gave him the skills necessary to advocate for himself and others in his community.

Cheri said the most significant policy change at Devereaux is that now "the consumer will serve on every committee within the structure of our program."

Shante Packer talked about her experience in a group called Teens with Choices in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The group was started as an adjunct to wraparound services in her community. They formed the group to include youth from throughout the community, not just those receiving wraparound services. Initially, some of the youth wanted to become peer mentors, but found not all people in the group were interested in becoming mentors. They focused instead on becoming known in their community as volunteers and fundraisers to "give back to the community." Participation in the group is completely voluntary and they do a lot of fund raising for other organizations.

Verneesha Banks, the adult facilitator of the group, added that funding is one of the main concerns of the group. They rely on their fundraising to pay for the fun activities they do, like bowling and skating, but the

primary focus of the group is to give back to the community.

Jessika Glick, a former young adult consumer, talked about her role as a Youth Coordinator at the Rhode Island Parent Support Network. She originally started working at the Parent Support Network as a volunteer youth leader, and served on the PSN Board of Directors. Eventually her position was written into a family leadership grant and she was able to get paid for the work she was doing. Youth were recruited to her group from the families that were receiving services at the Parent Support Network as well as other agencies.

The group's first project was filming a documentary on teen mental health and presenting it at the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health Conference in Washington, DC. Eventually they created a mission statement, rules and guidelines. The focus of the group now is to teach self-advocacy and leadership skills, do community service and volunteer activities, and plan fun activities. The youth are involved in the whole process of deciding which activities they wish to participate in. Jessika feels she is able to form a strong bond with youth in her group because she is a former consumer herself and has gone through many of the things they are now experiencing. She also emphasized it is important to provide training and support for someone in her position.

Many organizations are involving youth on a national level as well. The Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health and the National Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health at Georgetown University has youth presentations at their conferences and youth that serve on their Boards. Other organizations mentioned were: Destination Future (a group that holds an annual conference on independent living), Survivors of the System, and the Canadian Youth and Care Network.

The main point all of these young people brought forth was that involving youth helps to decrease negative stereotypes about youths' ability to work with adults and empowers them to make better decisions and become actively involved in their treatment. Youth appreciate opportunities for learning, growth and community involvement. Being involved can be both educational and fun. All of the youth agreed it is important that there are no labels attached to their groups, since being involved helps prepare them for their future, no matter what career path they choose.

*A full transcript of the session and more information is available on our Interact! page ([www.rtc.pdx.edu](http://www.rtc.pdx.edu)).*

**The author (anonymous)** is a young adult advocate and a former consumer of mental health services.