



## VALUING THE VOICE OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

Consider the following family's story, and how valuing the voice of our young people would affect your approach to providing assistance:

*A twenty-year old college student makes the decision to raise her two teen sisters. She has limited means but knows one thing with certainty—she wants to keep the three of them together. She admits she's not quite sure how she's going to accomplish this but somehow she will. As a service provider, how could you positively or negatively impact this situation? Do you have a sense that this family can somehow survive and be better off staying together? Or would you defer to tradition and be a skeptic to this family's potential? What other questions would you pose? Is foster care for the younger siblings the answer? Is the idea of a twenty-year old raising two teens too farfetched to consider? Is there an array of community resources for this family unit so they can somehow manage and make it day-to-day? Would you get to know these young people, this "family", and allow their input, their voice, to drive a family support plan?*

In our day-to-day work in building and advocating for improved systems of care for children with serious emotional disturbance, we have all been touched by the heart-wrenching experiences and even tragedies children with mental health issues and their families have encountered. I am confident, however, that we have all had the opportunity to share in the successes these same children and their families have achieved. As advocates and policy makers, it is our collective responsibility to build responsive service systems and to continue to advance systems change so that many, many more children and their families will experience fewer tragedies and more successes, and ultimately, have the opportunity to achieve their full potential. An area of system change that deserves to be highlighted and discussed is the importance of **valuing the voice of our young people—**



**empowering the youth voice** within a service system on both the service delivery and policy levels.

Traditionally, service systems are built to ensure the rights of the parent or caretaker. (Many would argue that even that does not occur nearly as well as it should.) To date, these same service systems do not

proactively promote the youth voice. Many service providers and policy makers may even have reservations in infusing the youth voice. To really drive the point, even our legal system is structured such that our children and youth have no legal rights. Clearly what is sorely missing is a service system's ability to readily hear our young people—child-serving systems have not invested the time or energy to build an infrastructure for youth empowerment.

As stakeholders of service systems, we, too, must step up to the challenge to infuse systems change by valuing our youth and weaving the youth voice into the infrastructure of systems of care. Too big a challenge to consider? Consider the following very real possibilities that can be implemented across communities.

### INDIVIDUAL AND SERVICE DELIVERY LEVELS

- Involve youth during treatment and service planning. Partner with additional agencies, especially with community based organizations, which already administer youth based programs. Highlight and increase the demand for these programs.
- Proactively solicit treatment ideas and therapeutic activities from the individual youth. The therapeutic benefit to the youth of feeling empowered during treatment is invaluable.
- Offer more treatment options. True informed consent is really about more treatment options. Fostering this type of open and engaging dialogue with a youth begins a process

to really empower the individual youth. At its core, treatment options and decisions become youth-driven.

- Recognize that building youth-empowering service systems is a cultural shift for service providers, family members, and especially youth. As service providers, the more you engage a youth, the more the individual youth will engage you. Speak in a simple and easy-to-understand language— of course, this a good rule in general!
- Highlight youth programs and increase the visibility of such programs. Does a church or synagogue sponsor traveling programs? Recently a program in Baltimore sponsored at-risk youth for a trip to Africa. Are there local businesses that hire and mentor youth? More companies support employees in volunteer efforts to mentor youth (Fannie Mae, AT&T, Gannett, AOL). What therapeutic recreational programs are available? Can your agency partner with a local recreation or vocational/rehabilitation agency? (E.g. arts, sports, after school programs, volunteer partnerships with local animal shelters)
- Sponsor a youth-led peer-to-peer program. Such programs can be nurtured to serve as youth-led support groups and mediation programs.

*Examples: Korean Community Center in San Francisco, California offers both peer-to-peer and family mediation programs. T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia runs a youth-driven mediation program which was recently visited by President Clinton and highlighted by CNN.*

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND POLICY LEVEL

Build and institute decision-making capacity within a service system for youth. Not only can systems be improved through increased input and recommendations, such a process invites stakeholder buy-in, with our young people being the “new” stakeholder.

- Develop an independent youth council.

*Example: San Diego County, CA*

- Incorporate youth membership on existing local, state and national governance structures and boards.

Adult mental health systems have traditionally instituted mandatory adult consumer membership on state mental health planning councils, protection and advocacy boards and committees.

*Example 1: Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health (FFCMH) and National Asian and Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse (NAPAFASA) are national organizations with youth board members.*

*Example 2: Youth Policy Commission of Alexandria, Virginia, includes two high school students on this local commission working on all issues related to youth, including issues of service prevention and integrating existing/overlapping community resources. Members of this commission include local judges and agency administrators.*

- Include at least two membership positions for youth on governance structures and boards. This builds a mechanism for youth members to uniquely support each other with the work at hand.
- Partner and designate an existing board member as a mentor to each youth board member. This measure helps to acclimate the new youth board member to the business of the board.
- Convene town hall meetings specifically targeted to youth on a regular basis (12 times a year). Allow youth to affect and impact the program priorities of your service system. Adult citizens are extended public comment periods on multiple projects. Why not extend the same opportunity to the young people of our communities? This ultimately builds stakeholder buy-in and builds the community’s credibility with its efforts on youth empowerment.
- Recognize and reward youth with leadership potential. Awarding even nominal scholarships (e.g. \$500 scholarships) can have a huge impact on empowering an individual youth as well as driving the community to rally around today’s youth.

Fostering an environment which values youth is vital in today’s society. Young people are an invaluable resource to communities. All too often our young people have concrete and creative solutions to improve our service systems but are often left feeling frustrated and jaded. This is our charge—as system change agents, we must take on the challenge of truly empowering the youth voice and restructuring and modifying our service systems to be responsive to our young people. Simply stated, these young individuals are our future and their voices deserved to be heard.

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