



Youth 'N Action: For Youth, By Youth!

Youth Involvement in Washington State

Delaney, 16, is living with her grandparents due to parental abuse and neglect. She's angry from the trauma she experienced and does not look to her classmates for support, as she fears they will view her situation negatively. She tries to isolate herself and falls under the radar because she feels no one cares. Her teachers and peers perceive her as disconnected and uninterested. *Where can she go for support? Where can she go to be heard? Where she can meet people who understand her situation?*

Sean, 20, struggles with depression. When he moved into a neighborhood filled with drugs and violence about five years ago, he joined a gang to protect and support his family. He didn't want to join a gang but felt there were no other options. He knew gang life wasn't for him after seeing friends and family die, fall into addiction and go to jail. Two years ago, a friend told him about a local youth organization that wanted to hear his voice and give him opportunities he couldn't find in

his neighborhood or gang. He checked the program out and found it focused on his strengths and talents and not the poor choices he'd made by joining a gang. That was important because he had not thought anyone would understand him. The program gave him a chance to remove himself from the lifestyle of his neighborhood and get involved in positive and productive activities with his peers. It also provided him resources to help deal with his depression, which he was self-medicating with drugs and alcohol. He got help with his addiction and became involved in a supported employment program. He now works full time and serves as a leader in the organization. He shares his experiences with other youth who are undergoing challenges in their life, so that they may create resiliency in their lives like he did. *Where did he go? What organization would accept a "gang" member?*

Gio, 17, has a mental health diagnosis. School becomes increasingly stressful as he fears the stigma of mental illness will fall upon him if people find out his diagnosis. His mother knows he needs to have a positive social connection and be around

people who will not judge him for his challenges. She speaks out about it in a parent support program and they connect her to a youth organization that combats stigma. Gio joins the program and realizes for the first time that, not only is he not alone, but also he has nothing to be ashamed of. He can now help people who go through what he went through and do something positive with peers like himself. *What is this program that helps young people turn their "problems" into strengths?*

Policy makers and service providers can't figure out why their multi-million dollar pilots are not working and why youth continue to spiral down in their lives and "fail" programs. They've brought in consultants from all over the nation; they've reviewed all their data and notes and finally, they realize they have never heard from the youth themselves... *Where can they go to get youth voice? Who will support these youth?*

Answer: Youth 'N Action. The young people in Youth 'N Action have had different experiences, but their goals are the same: to make life better for youth in Washington, and

TABLE 1. SELF-REPORT OF EDUCATIONAL STATUS, EDUCATIONAL & CRIMINAL JUSTICE EXPERIENCES (N= 33)

Educational Status	Percentages
Currently in high school	63%
Graduated high school	10%
Dropped out	17%
Other	7%
Currently in community college	3%
Regarding education: Have you ever...	
...been suspended?	67%
...been expelled?	15%
...attended an alternative school?	33%
...had an IEP (Individualized Education Plan)?	58%
Regarding criminal justice: Have you ever...	
...had criminal justice involvement?	45%
...been arrested?	39%
...been charged with a felony?	18%
...been charged with a misdemeanor?	18%
...served time in prison?	12%
...served time in jail?	3%

to add positive experiences and peers to their lives. Youth 'N Action is a unique program that supports youth voice. Youth are the experts in their lives and their recoveries.

About Youth 'N Action

As work on systems of care was undertaken in King County, Washington, there was a growing recognition that as important as parent empowerment is, it does not guarantee that consumer youth will receive services relevant to them. This led to the formation of a separate youth program—originally called Health 'N

Action—that was designed to partner with family support and advocacy groups and professionals. Eventually, Health 'N Action partnered with SAFE WA (Statewide Action for Family Empowerment of Washington), and became the statewide youth advocacy program now known as Youth 'N Action (YNA).

YNA brings youth voice to public policy and empowers at-risk youth ages 14-24 to make positive differences in their lives, their communities, and systems that serve youth. YNA is a youth-driven organization surrounded by youth-friendly adults and professionals who provide support

to the youth to help them create the positive outcomes they desire.

YNA provides youth with a variety of opportunities to make a positive difference. For example, in Eastern and Western Washington, YNA holds regional monthly meetings where youth get together and talk about the positive differences they'd like to see in their lives, communities and the systems that serve them. Additionally, youth receive education about programs and services available to them to help them reach their life goals.

YNA also provides youth with opportunities to advocate and educate. Youth bring their voices to important state-level venues such as the Washington State Community Transformation Partnership, a coalition of consumer advocacy organizations, and the Prevention Policy Summit, held in May of 2008, where over 260 mental health stakeholders identified Washington State's priorities in the area of mental illness prevention. At the national level, YNA members trained psychiatrists on youth-directed care at a psychiatric conference in New Orleans, presented study results on the needs of transition-age youth at the Research and Training Center's Building on Family Strengths Conference at Portland State University, and participated in other conferences sponsored by Georgetown University Institutes and the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health.

Youth 'N Action also provides many avenues to encourage leadership and positive youth development, such as Spokane's YNA Student 2 Student program (a peer support program in a local high school) and the Youth Stigma Reduction Speakers Bureau. A developing pathway is in the area of artistic expression. YNA leaders are currently producing a play titled, 'Life is Not a Game,' designed to give a real-life view of the issues youth in transition face in regard to mental health, family, peers, social lives, education, and employment.

As the collaboration between Youth 'N Action and SAFE WA continued to develop, members realized they held widely different perspectives regarding youth involvement within

YNA. They came to believe that an evaluation process would assist them to more clearly identify a philosophy for the benefit of the youth, their families and the state of Washington.

A Youth-Driven Evaluation Process

In the spirit of being youth-driven, youth made the key decisions in every step of the evaluation. Adult partners were available as a resource, not a force, and offered their partnership and support throughout the project. To start out, YNA leaders developed the Youth 'N Action program logic model. The logic model helped them to form their draft focus group questions. Subsequently, they finalized the focus group questions, created ground rules for the focus groups, and edited a pre-focus group questionnaire for participants to complete. When this hard work was done, they celebrated with other YNA members at a billiards and arcade restaurant.

Youth co-facilitators from Eastern and Western Washington were trained in focus group facilitation through discussion and role playing.

Thirty-three youth ranging in age from 14 to 24 participated in the focus groups. The sample was 58% male and the mean age was 17.1. The majority of participants were European American (46%), with 24% African American, 6% Native American and 24% multiracial. Five of the 33 participants had children. Other background information is provided in Table 1.

On the questionnaire, youth were provided a list of diagnoses and asked to check if they self-identified with and/or had ever been diagnosed with any of them. ADHD and other disruptive behavior disorders, learning disabilities and anxiety were the three most frequently identified diagnoses. Frequencies of self-reported diagnoses are shown in Table 2. The range of diagnoses was from 0-7, with a mean of one. It is noteworthy that 49% of the youth did not check any diagnoses.

Interviews were conducted in a youth-friendly manner and environment. Youth were given the opportuni-

ty to participate in one-on-one phone interviews or attend focus groups. Youth were met in their local areas, provided with transportation through volunteers and project staff, paid \$40 for their participation, and provided with a meal. Youth were happy with how the focus groups were conducted and thankful for the opportunity.

Focus groups were audio taped, professionally transcribed and edited. After this, a group of key youth and adult stakeholders met to review focus group transcripts and highlight trends. Once again, youth took leadership, since their familiarity with youth culture and typical peer situations would allow them to make more subtle and accurate interpretations of the focus group data.

Highlights from the Results

What were your first impressions of Youth 'N Action?

- Empowerment:

I liked it because everybody spoke their mind but also listened at the same time.

- Acceptance and felt no stigma:

My first impression of the group was that it was a good, fun place to come hang out and not have to hide who you are. You can hang out with different races of people and not worry about anything, not worry about being judged or anything like that.

- Opportunity:

For opportunity, I thought this could take me places, places to where I can get what I think and how I feel off of my mind and off my chest.

- Good environment and non-religious:

My first impression of Youth 'N Action was, I came to one of the meetings and I really enjoyed the fact that it was a youth group that wasn't based on any particular religion, because usually that is what youth groups focus on.

- Educational:

My first impression was good. I mainly did the educational things about it, so I think it is a good program.

- Fun, cool and FOOD:

The first time I went to a Youth 'N Action meeting, you know, it was cool. It had food there, but that wasn't it. You all trying to do some real stuff trying to set up a little fund raiser and stuff, a little concert and stuff... You all had former NBA star Joe Pace. It was crazy when I seen that, Joe Pace, hey a basketball player. I was like, "OOHHH!!!"

- Community service:

My first impression was that it looked like a lot of fun and it looked kind of interesting to get involved in. A lot of things like how to help our community in different ways. So our community can be a better place.

- Meeting new people:

When I first came I thought it was pretty cool. I would like to be doing this on a regular basis. It taught me a lot about tolerance and I guess not judging, just accepting people regardless of their faults.

How has Youth 'N Action affected you personally?

- Life, professional and leadership skills:

It has helped me with a lot, I think you call it intrapersonal skills, like



TABLE 2. YOUTH SELF-REPORT OF HAVING BEEN DIAGNOSED OR SELF-IDENTIFIED* (N= 33)

Diagnosis	Percentages
Anxiety disorders**	18%
Depression	12%
Bipolar disorder	6%
ADHD and other disruptive behavior disorders***	34%
Learning disabilities	24%
Substance abuse	12%
Serious Emotional Disorder	9%
Eating disorder	6%
Did not check any diagnosis	49%
Checked "unknown"	12%
Other	9%

*Percentages add to more than 100% because of multiple diagnoses

**Includes obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

***Includes conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder

time management and responsibility and stuff like that.

- Leadership, advocacy, youth voice and empowerment:

I think that Youth 'N Action taught me a lot more about myself, trying to help other people. Guidance, growth, support and motivation.

Once I got involved in the program I quit stealing, because when I went to the meetings and we talked about our problems that helped me out... If Youth 'N Action were to disappear my life would probably change. I'd probably go back to stealing. Well, probably not, because they taught me a lot of things. Also, I probably wouldn't be having that much fun, as I was saying. I'd probably go back to my shyness a little bit, maybe. That's about it.

- Trust, respect, confidence, understanding, belonging and stigma reduction:

There are people out there like me that deal with mental health, and it is like I am not the only one out there, you know. I feel better now that I'm not the only person out there.

- Resources, opportunities and fun:

I have been to Olympia meeting legislators and stuff. That is something that I thought I would never do either. They got to get to know me – well, not really get to know me, but see my face and shake hands with a couple of people that I never thought I would see. Those are like big type of people—well, not big type, but legislators, people that write laws and bills and stuff. I am coming from Seattle and I

never thought I would be sitting right here right now, about to be a "facilitator." [laughter]

- New friends and new experiences:

I have more friends now that I never thought would like me because I was different.

Final Thoughts

I [Tamara] started this evaluation as a youth leader in Youth 'N Action who was motivated and thankful for all the opportunities, encouragement and support Youth 'N Action had provided me. I felt that if we did this evaluation it would show people how valuable this program is to youth and how it can touch so many lives and create change in the community. All it took to turn my life around was someone who cared and someone who listened and now I'm able to help so many other young people than myself.

Authors

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For more information see the following websites:

Youth 'N Action:

www.YouthNAction.org

Statewide Action for Family Empowerment:

www.SAFWashington.org