Listening Session Summary: Focus on Service-Learning and Youth Engagement

Location: Denver, CO
Date: October 19, 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 service-learning and youth engagement?

- **Improve communication** regarding the diverse community service options available to youth.
- Raise **public awareness** of the needs of older adolescents and young adults.
- **Train adults** how to better engage with youth, and teach youth and adults how to work together.
- Increase the **availability of mentors** for youth, and ensure that each young person is connected to a **caring adult**.
- Create environments where youth feel **physically and emotionally safe**.
- Actively engage **youth voices** at all levels of service provision and policymaking.
- Ask young people what their own needs are, rather than assuming a professional knows best.
- Treat youth who serve in advisory roles with ongoing **respect**—often adults start to take over.
- **Empower families** so that they can advocate for themselves.
- Help schools better **match their services to the needs of youth** (including those with special needs, such as young parents).
- **Provide all youth with opportunities** for enrichment and empowerment (not just a select few).
- Help youth receive services without having to go to multiple agencies.
- **Change accountability metrics** so that agencies do not turn away youth at higher risk of failure.
- **Keep the door open** for youth who disengage from services.
- Maintain a **holistic view of youth**, and respect their individuality.
- Ensure that programming for young people is **developmentally appropriate** and covers all ages.
- Encourage youth to communicate with one another in person, not just remotely via technology.
- Improve the future by **leveraging the good qualities that all youth already possess**.
- Encourage young people to **get involved in community service voluntarily at an early age**—often it becomes a school-based chore if first introduced in adolescence as a requirement.
- **Build cultural competence** and promote diversity and inclusion among education systems, service providers, and communities.
- Introduce more **flexible funding** and encourage collaboration through the RFP process.

What are the needs of youth (up to the age of 24) related to service-learning and youth engagement?

- All youth must have their **basic needs met** (e.g., safety, food, shelter, etc.) to be able to help others.
- Young people and their families need **more information about how to access services**, and for services to be more coordinated and accessible.
- Youth benefit from opportunities to master new skills, to develop creative strategies to solve problems, and to **develop their own ideas** and interests for service-learning.
- Youth need opportunities to **take risks and learn from their successes and failures**, and have access to mentoring to develop self-sufficiency.
- Youth need **support** to achieve their goals, rather than punitive measures for failure.
- Youth need to feel that they have **relationships with trusted adults** who truly care about them, accept them, listen to them, and believe in them.
- Disengaged youth need more **opportunities and outreach** to fill leadership and advisory roles.
- More funding is needed to make **effective programs available to more youth.**
- Adults need to be persistent in offers of assistance to youth in need, and need to **seek out youth** who may be hidden (e.g., undocumented youth, youth in locked facilities).
- Youth should be engaged in **reaching out to other youth** in need of services.
- Youth in rural and frontier areas need **better access** to services and programs.
- Youth need **comprehensive reproductive health education** and services.

What are effective programs and strategies regarding service-learning and youth engagement? Are there program or policy gaps?

Effective programs and strategies
- Encourage and include **youth voices** (e.g. youth share stories at State Capitol).
- Use social marketing and social media to **engage youth.**
- **Empower youth** by forming youth advisory councils and by inviting youth to share their stories.
- **Combine youth groups** to increase their advocacy power.
- Use creative approaches to **engage marginalized youth** and get them involved in service-learning (e.g., Colorado's rural collaborative on runaway and homeless youth).
- Provide enrichment programs such as Girl Scouts to **include youth who are typically excluded** (e.g., youth who are homeless, youth involved in the juvenile justice, system, etc.).
- Reach across language and cultural barriers to **engage immigrant parents.**
- Use **family-driven service provision** on reservations (e.g., Colorado youth development grant).
- Employ more **flexible approaches** to funding, staffing, and community engagement in rural areas.
- Offer **employment through service-learning** (e.g., YouthBuild, Youth Conservation Corps).
- Provide **school-based wraparound services** that extend beyond the school day (e.g., DenverKids).
- Integrate creative activities, physical activity, and service-learning within school (e.g., International Baccalaureate program).
- Start engaging youth in service-learning at a **younger age** (e.g., Front Range Earth Force).
- Use **college-based service-learning programs** as a resource.

Program and policy gaps
- Discussions about the need for system reform (e.g., foster care) may not in reality lead to change.
- Strategies developed for urban settings are often not a good fit for rural areas.
- Most youth programming ends at age 18, some at age 21, and all by age 24.
- It is difficult to get funding to reach out to a representative sample of youth to learn what the population wants.

- The move to put information and services for youth online (e.g., AmeriCorps) has had the unintended consequence of excluding potential clients who lack consistent Internet access.
- Youth who are undocumented immigrants are ineligible for services.
- There needs to be intentional inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth in policies and initiatives (e.g., Safe Schools initiatives).

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 with developmental disabilities.
- Youth with mental health issues.
- Youth of color.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.
- Youth who have been involved with the juvenile justice system.
- Youth who speak English as a second language.
- Youth who live in rural areas.
- Youth who lack access to technology.
- Youth who have become involved in social support systems (e.g., Section Eight)— it can be difficult to become independent of them.
- Individuals who are lower-income and lack the life skills needed to live another way.
- Individuals who have experienced physical and/or psychosocial trauma.
- Youth who are homeless or otherwise disengaged.
- Youth who are not naturally outspoken.

Best ways to serve these populations
- Give youth with disabilities with more **opportunities to engage in advocacy** (e.g., People First).
- Look at **underlying trauma** and other issues when addressing problem behaviors.
- Remove language in legislation that contributes to **bias toward youth involved in systems** such as juvenile justice or foster care.
- Remove legislation that requires **school notification** for past juvenile offenses.
- Make it possible for youth to **participate in their congressional district**, even if their legal address is in another district (because they are in foster care, are homeless, etc.).
- Ensure that legislators and others who ask for youth input **really listen** rather than asking for youth input as a token act.
- Develop new engagement models to help **get under-represented youth in advisory roles**.
- Be aware that youth who are not naturally outspoken also have valuable opinions.

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

- Youth benefit from programs that take a **holistic approach**, providing them with skills that help them in both the short and long term, providing intensive case management, offering access to caring adults, engaging youth as leaders, and following up with youth after they have left the program (e.g., YouthBuild).
- Youth need well-trained, dedicated program staff, teachers, and/or mentors who **use effective strategies, listen, have high expectations for them, and are culturally competent and inclusive**.
- Youth need program staff who do not stereotype them and who **focus on their potential**.
- Young adults need **mentors who are invested in their success** and really able to help them.

- Youth involved in the justice system need **supportive probation officers** who act as mentors.
- Teachers are in an excellent position to **identify youth with problems** and offer them assistance.
- After-school and summer programming protects youth by providing **safe and enriching activities.**
- Youth would benefit from initiatives to **increase stability among teachers and service providers.**
- Youth benefit when programs have resources to **invest in recruiting and maintaining good staff.**
- Youth benefit from programs that help them **explore and value their culture** while providing them with health education and with advocacy and leadership skills (e.g., Latinas of Vision).
- Youth have a better experience when their participation in initiatives is **voluntary.**
- Youth need programs that are **flexible and realistic** in terms of their expectations.
- Youth become empowered when they have **opportunities for their voices to be heard**.
- Youth will benefit if programs that demonstrate measurable positive impacts receive more **consistent funding** and are made more widely available.
- Programs benefit when they **collaborate with institutions** that can help them to measure their impacts (e.g., Fortitude Development Program with Colorado State University).
- **Religious organizations** can play a very positive role in the lives of youth.

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

Barriers to collaboration
- The current funding structure puts agencies in competition with one another.
- Agencies feel threatened by turf issues.
- Sometimes collaborations are somewhat forced and the agencies involved are not a good fit.
- Program leaders lack the time and resources to engage in collaboration.

How to remove barriers and provide initiatives for collaboration
- Provide **catalysts** for collaboration rather than mandates.
- Ensure that agencies have a **shared definition of "youth."**
- Identify **shared desired outcomes** for youth across agencies.
- Develop **innovative** collaborations among agencies that serve very different purposes.
- Use **networking and communication** to share information about events across agencies.
- Encourage collaboration at the system level, the agency level and the individual level.
- **Adapt models of effective collaboration** from higher education, philanthropists, businesses, etc.
- **Invest in innovative models** to solve problems.
- Allow grantees to use **flexible approaches** based on their knowledge of what works.
- Help grantees be able to count on **matching funds** from other sources.
- Develop a **common grant proposal model** across funding streams to make the application process more efficient for agencies.

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

- Provide professional development to civil servants and others regarding how to **treat youth with respect and dignity.**
- Make more resources available to **help youth cope with unexpected traumatic events.**
- Establish a **shared definition of "youth."**
- Encourage youth to participate and to **take ownership of policies and issues that affect them.**
- Ensure that initiatives and **policies come to fruition.**
- Collaborate with a **wider range of stakeholders** (especially community members).

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

- **Improve communication** and use more creative strategies to reach out across agencies.
- Engage in **more communication with youth** through listservs and other such systems.
- Ensure that communication with youth is **clear and inclusive.**
- Engage in more **research to identify what works**, and engage youth to help carry out research.
- Improve the availability of **data**, especially for vulnerable subpopulations.
- Encourage **youth civic engagement** and vet new policies with youth.
- **Improve the public school system**; it touches nearly all youth.
- Better publicize the extent to which agencies are reaching **goals and benchmarks.**
- Increase the government's **openness to hearing critiques** of its systems from a variety of sources.
- Use policies to **encourage collaborations between schools and community service providers**.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS from Region VIII (Denver, CO)

Participating organizations*:
- Colorado Youth Advisory Council
- Girl Scouts of Colorado
- Mile High United Way
- Mile High Youth Corps
- Denver Kids Inc.
- Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights
- Groundwork Denver
- Airline Ambassadors
- FrontRange Earth Force
- Maple Star Colorado
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Byrne Urban Scholars
- Colorado State University
- National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association
- Franko Group
- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

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