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THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUTH WORKERS

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BACKGROUND

Staff is a critical ingredient for quality youth-serving organizations. Programs often attribute their success to effective youth workers, and research shows that professional development can enhance the skills of both new and longtime staffers. Though the concept of professional development is not new, its significance for youth workers has been gaining momentum slowly. This brief summarizes the importance of professional development, identifies core competencies for youth workers, highlights professional development training delivery models, and sets forth next steps for professional development that can benefit youth programs.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF YOUTH PROGRAMS?

Professional development is a broad term that can refer to a variety of education, training, and support opportunities available to youth workers.¹ Professional development has existed for several decades among national youth organizations,² but professional development options have become increasingly diverse, reflecting the diverse paths people take to become youth workers. Thus, professional development opportunities for youth workers are varied and may include but are not limited to:³

- § Higher education training, such as continuing education courses and degree programs;
- § Pre-service training and orientation for new staff;
- § In-service training provided by programs to current staff;
- § Training seminars and resource centers provided by external organizations;
- § Local and national credentialing systems and programs;
- § Local and national conferences;
- § Mentoring programs; and
- § Ongoing informal resources, such as newsletters, online discussion boards, and “brown bag” lunches for staff members to share ideas and expertise.

WHO ARE YOUTH WORKERS?

A youth worker is someone who works in a program directly with young people to facilitate their personal, social, and educational development.⁴ Unlike other human service workers, those who work in youth programs are mainly part-time employees, and many do not receive the benefits or earnings associated with a full-time job.⁵ Another characteristic of youth workers is that they enter the profession through a number of different paths and, thus, have backgrounds in a range of fields, including social work, education, public health, and community education. Other youth workers enter the profession without any formal education and training and gain knowledge and skills on the job. Though full-time

program directors and coordinators view their work as their primary occupation, many youth workers regard working in youth programs as a “stepping stone” or supplemental job opportunity.⁵

THE VALUE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- § **Professional development improves program quality.** The quality of a youth-serving program depends heavily on the ability and professional training of the program’s staff to: 1) relate effectively to young people and understand their needs, 2) develop and execute interesting activities for youth, 3) help young people resolve behavioral problems and issues between themselves and others, 4) interact effectively with parents, school staff, and any other stakeholders and, 5) effectively communicate the mission, goals, and policies of the program.⁶ Staff training can help youth workers with all of these tasks.³ Research suggests that youth workers can possess a unique characteristic called *sigfluence*: a positive, significant, long-term interpersonal influence over youth. Youth workers with *sigfluence* can affect a young person’s academic, social, and emotional achievements, influencing career choice and generating positive changes in self-image.⁷ Many young people, particularly in low-income communities, rely on youth development programs to help them make a safe and healthy transition through adolescence. The training of youth workers is critical because it develops sigfluence in youth workers so as they can develop meaningful relationships with young people that support their successful transition to adulthood and careers.⁸
- § **Professional development affects the survival of providers in the field.**⁹ Research demonstrates that trained youth workers are better equipped to meet the divergent needs of youth. However, in the under-resourced field of after-school and youth development, a principal question becomes: who pays for training?⁹ High staff turnover due to low wages, minimal or nonexistent benefits, limited options for upward mobility, and a lack of agreed-upon core competencies undermine efforts to provide training for transient, part-time line staff. Programs often prefer to invest in their leaders, who tend to be full-time employees and have longer job tenure.⁵ However, training may help to increase the retention of staff at all levels, as well as to improve program quality for participants.¹⁰
- § **A comprehensive professional development agenda is vital to enhancing and sustaining a cadre of quality youth workers.** Youth workers often experience an overwhelming sense of responsibility as they operate under conditions in which there is little time for recovery between situations, events, programs, and the individual demands of youth. Working under such pressure, youth services providers can experience tremendous emotional drain and can burn out. In a study conducted by the Center for 4-H Youth Development, even though youth workers were not asked directly about burnout in the interviews, close to 25 percent of them raised this as an issue.⁹ Many youth workers come to the field with energy and good intentions but little training or knowledge of child and youth development. Professional development may reduce burnout and help youth workers both to stay in the field and to advance within it.¹¹
- § **Professional development benefits the individual.** Operating within the world of youth requires flexibility and adaptability. When an adolescent needs understanding, providers must be there to understand. When an adolescent needs firmness, the youth worker must stand firm. Overall, youth workers must be able to adapt to the needs of the youth that they serve.¹² In a study conducted by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), three-fourths of the 242 post-survey youth worker respondents indicated that training had a “great deal” or “good amount” of impact on their ability to handle the multiple roles and endless responsibilities expected of them by their agencies.¹² In addition, 90 percent of the youth workers completing the survey said that

the Advancing Youth Development training [described later in this brief] that they received had helped them to identify their own strengths and areas in need of improvement.¹²

§ **Professional development benefits the program.** At the organizational level, training opportunities expose youth workers to research and “best practices,” which can then be incorporated at the program level.¹³ As a result, the entire organization benefits because the training experience of youth workers often can serve as a conduit for networking and cross-agency collaboration. Training opportunities also give youth workers the ability to help each other understand and deal with difficult situations.¹² For example, participants in an evaluation study conducted through the Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers (BEST) initiative created by the Academy for Educational Development (AED) agreed that, “We now engage in more collaboration. There is a broadened perspective of organizations and a universal language.”¹²

§ **Professional development benefits the field.** Training professionalizes and legitimizes the fields of youth work and youth development. In 1999, the AED reported that professional growth, networking with other organizations, and sharing knowledge were among the benefits employees received from participating in a professional development program. In a later study conducted by the AED in 2002, an overwhelming number of front-line youth workers agreed that courses, certificates, and degree opportunities increased their professional status because these opportunities provided leverage for them to receive the same level of recognition as other professionals within and outside the field.¹² National, state, and local policy makers are ultimately accountable for ensuring that such a continuity of support exists for youth workers so that they can prepare young people adequately for adult life.¹⁴

CORE COMPETENCIES FOR YOUTH WORKERS

In light of the crucial link between young people’s experience in programs and the skills and knowledge program staff need to support youth workers, a growing movement has emerged to build some consensus about a set of core skills that all youth development workers should possess.¹⁵ The AED defines core competencies as the knowledge, skills, and personal attributes of youth development workers,¹⁶ and the “demonstrated capacities” that allow a youth development worker to be a resource to youth, organizations, and communities.¹⁷ The AED places the core competencies into four categories: 1) Youth Development Workers as Support for Youth, Families, and Colleagues, (2) Youth Development Workers as Resources to Youth, (3) Youth Workers as Resources to Organizations, and (4) Youth Workers as Resources to Communities. Additional information on core competencies can be found at: <http://www.aed.org/Youth/>.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING DELIVERY MODELS

The content and format of staff training and professional development depend on an organization’s needs, stage of development, and available resources. Many organizations distinguish permanent, full-time staff members (such as program directors) from part-time, often seasonal, group leaders who provide direct services (such as camp counselors).² Some organizations can only provide their youth workers with limited opportunities for professional development because of limited resources, prohibitive costs, inaccessible locations, lack of transportation, or other barriers. Fortunately, however, a number of training delivery models have been developed that do enable programs to take advantage of professional development opportunities for their youth workers. These models include teams of community and youth workers, in-service training, affinity groups, and training for supervisors.

§ Teams of Community and Youth Workers

Small agencies find it challenging to locate relevant and affordable training for their youth workers. Many programs cannot afford specific training that youth workers may need or in which youth workers may be interested. In response, it has become critical to build teams of skilled community youth workers and involve them as trainers. In this way, the field will not have to rely solely on subject matter experts or professional trainers. The development of an internal training program can:¹⁸

- *Save money*- A “train-the-trainer” program can send one staff member to an outside training class, with that person training other people on staff.
- *Empower organizations*- By developing internal training resources, programs maximize their resources and teach staff members to be self-reliant.
- *Deal quickly with staff turnover*- By training one key person to train others, staff distribute the knowledge acquired and create a repository of knowledge within the organization that can be tapped when someone leaves it.

The National Institute for Community Youth Work (NICYW) developed the Advancing Youth Development curriculum, to ensure consistent, high quality training experiences for youth workers across the country through a national train-the-trainer system. Under this model, youth workers are trained and can then become trainers themselves, as mentioned previously. Information about the NICYW can be found at www.nti.aed.org.

§ In-Service Training

Community-oriented programs tend to draw their staffs from the community and to offer professional development in-house. The in-service training model is simple: Staff members form two- or three-person teams, research a topic relevant to a designated area within the organization, then share what they learned at their regular staff meetings. Most research is connected to an existing project, ensuring the research’s relevance and impact. The in-service training model puts the youth workers in charge of their own educational process and capitalizes on each worker’s desire to succeed and improve outcomes for youth.⁶ In-service training can be a part of weekly, bimonthly, or monthly staff meetings. Further information can be obtained about in-service training at the National Youth Development Information Center www.nydic.org/nydic/.

§ Affinity Groups

The affinity group model, pioneered by the Partnership for After School Education (PASE), brings together practitioners and other after-school stakeholders on a regular basis to increase their capacity to create and implement quality programs.¹⁹ Affinity groups are self-sufficient support systems of about five to 15 people. A number of affinity groups may work together toward a common goal in a large initiative, or one affinity group might conceive of and carry out an objective identified by the program. Sometimes, affinity groups remain together over a long period of time, existing as lobbying and/or study groups.²⁰ Among the key characteristics of affinity groups:²¹

- *Group members generally have the same position or function within the organization.* Thus, members are less likely to feel inhibited at meetings because they need not fear repercussions from those with more formal power.
- *Roles of group members are formalized.* The group elects a convener, a recorder, and a reporter, and the group specifies a term of office, usually six months. The group also has an external facilitator, who is not a member of the group or organization.
- *Group meetings are regular and frequent.* The group can progress quickly through the stages of group development by holding frequent meetings. Affinity groups generally meet weekly or biweekly on the same day of the week and are disbanded once the initial task is accomplished.

- *The group has a charter stating its mission and area of responsibility.* Defining the group's mission and area of responsibility relative to other affinity groups and other groups in the infrastructure is necessary to prevent overlaps and/or gaps in responsibilities.
- *The group is self-managing.* It is responsible for managing its processes and output. To heighten their self-management effectiveness, affinity groups are kept relatively small, usually with no more than 15 to 20 members.

Additional information can be found at www.pasetter.com/aboutPase/summary.html.

§ **Training for Supervisors**

Currently, few training opportunities exist for supervisors of youth workers, which may reflect the absence of the kind of informal networks that are available to youth workers. The Supervising Youth Development Practice (SYDP), developed by the National Institute for Community Youth Work, is a 24-hour course that teaches program directors how to integrate youth development into their programs and their work with staff. The course includes sessions on: 1) the key concepts of youth development, 2) ways for supervisors to support the youth development work of their staffs, 3) the intricate connections between youth services, opportunities, and supports and youth outcomes, 4) the elimination of stereotypes about youth and their program participation, and 5) use definitions of knowledge, skills, and attributes of an exemplary youth development supervisor. Supervisors can benefit from training that teaches them how to support youth workers in ways other than just by acting as a role model. Additional information on the SYDP curriculum can be found at www.nti.aed.org/.

WHAT ARE SOME POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS ?

Researchers and youth services practitioners agree that professional development involves more than training. An effective system of professional development emphasizes recruitment, hiring, orientation, supervision, coaching, and assessment.¹ A program can take two major steps as it embarks on professional development for its staff.⁵

STEP 1: DEVELOP A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM FOR WORKERS IN YOUR PROGRAM

There is a crucial link between a young person's experiences in after-school and youth programs and the skills and knowledge of program staff. Organizations such as Achieve Boston and the Institute on Out of School Time have proposed a broad-based professional development system. This system would provide youth workers accessible and affordable high-quality training with the goal of achieving higher quality programs for children and youth. There are five distinct elements that are necessary for developing an effective professional development system:^{2,22}

- § *Core Competencies* that outline the knowledge and skills practitioners need to be effective, sensitive youth workers.
- § *A Training System* that is grounded in the core competencies and is responsive to the diverse nature and needs of staff members in a range of roles, at different levels of responsibility, and with varying amounts of experience in the field.
- § *A Training and Trainer Approval System* that ensures the quality of both the content and the delivery of training. A training and delivery system is necessary for frontline youth workers and should include assessment and access to learning for continuing professional development. A comprehensive training and delivery system would involve expanding existing efforts, increasing the coordination of training and professional development experiences, and enlarging peer networks.²³
- § *A Professional Registry* of all relevant training and education completed by staff members. The creation of a professional registry builds alliances and partnerships to help secure external support

(policy, funding, etc.) at all levels and disseminates information about professional development in a manner that creates excitement, interest, and, ultimately demand.²³

- § *A Career Framework and Pathways* that link roles, responsibilities, and salary ranges.⁸ Career paths and compensation are essential to building a professional development system and should be linked inextricably to the other elements described above. For instance, mechanisms should be in place to ensure that youth workers receive increased compensation for demonstrating agreed-upon competencies and participating in professional development that improves performance.²³

STEP 2: ACCESS A RANGE OF EXISTING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Initiatives around the country demonstrate that investment in a continuum of training, leadership development, networking, and on-site technical assistance is critical to developing effective youth workers and addressing the needs of youth. Unfortunately, even though professional development initiatives are so essential to ensuring quality youth development programming,²⁴ a sufficient critical mass of educational and training opportunities for youth workers does not yet exist. Nevertheless, some helpful resources are available in this area, such as the cross-state, cross-city, and national training educational and training options in youth development listed below.

1. Local Professional Development Opportunities

- § Many local community colleges and four-year institutions offer courses and training on pertinent topics.
- § Local school districts can help with training tutors.⁶
- § State Service Commissions have information about state programs that may have similar training needs.

2. Cross-City and Cross-State Professional Development Opportunities

- § **The Youth Policy Institute of Iowa (YPII)** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving youth policy and practice using principles of positive youth development. The YPII assists state and local community agencies in all aspects of developing and implementing positive youth development policies and programs. Further information can be found at www.ypii.org.
- § **Achieve Boston** is a collaborative effort to help after-school and youth workers develop their professional skills and knowledge, advance their careers, and, ultimately, better serve children, youth, and families. Achieve Boston offers after-school and youth workers a locally based and easy-to-access training system. Resources related to the Achieve Boston Initiative can be found at www.achievetoboston.org.
- § **The Massachusetts School-Age Coalition (MSAC)** conducts training workshops across the state, posts a registry of professional development opportunities, and advocates for a career ladder system for youth practitioners. Details are available at www.mass-sac.org.
- § **The City University of New York (CUNY) Youth Studies Certificate Program** consists of a sequence of five courses offered at CUNY senior colleges that bridge theory with practice. Students draw on professional experience in interdisciplinary courses that explore youth employment, adolescent development, cultural issues, group dynamics, and communication skills. For additional information go to www.cuny.edu.

3. National Professional Development Opportunities

- § **The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work** developed the Advancing Youth Development curriculum in collaboration with the Academy of Educational Development (AED). The training consists of a 28-hour course in the basics of youth development. The course was one of the first to focus on youth development practitioners. It provides an easily delivered, accessible,

and inexpensive initial professional development experience for youth workers and youth services supervisors. Additional information about Advancing Youth Development is available at www.nti.aed.org/BestSites.html.

- § **The National 4-H Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship (YDPA)** is an education and training program for youth workers. Through this structured apprenticeship program, which includes related instruction and on-the-job training, youth services practitioners develop the skills they need to serve youth in their communities effectively. The YDPA Web site provides information on articles, links, books, and related professional development resources at www.fourhcouncil.edu.
- § The National Partnership for Community Leadership (NPCL)²⁴ sponsors the **National Youth Development Practitioners Institute** several times each year and provides a maximum of 270 credit hours toward the YDPA certification. Training through the Institute is based on best practices in youth development and youth employment and is directed at creating better opportunities for the nation's most vulnerable youth. The institute offers managers, technical, and front-line staff members a week-long training session that exposes them to creative and effective models and practices relating to youth development. More information on the institute and an online catalog of its materials is available at www.npcl.org/program/ydpi.htm.
- § **The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NOIST)**, based at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, has been engaged in the field of after-school and staff training for more than 20 years. The NOIST is committed to influencing policy, increasing standards and professional recognition, and spearheading community action aimed at improving the availability, quality, and viability of programs serving children and youth. The NOIST Web site offers a broad array of resources and information related to training and professional development issues for out-of-school time youth practitioners at www.niost.org/.
- § **The Out-of-School Time Resource Center**, located at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Research on Youth and Social Policy, seeks to help connect out-of-school-time programs with professional development resources. These resources are available at www.ssw.upenn.edu/ostrc.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Program: Facilitating Leadership in Youth (FLY)

Location: Washington, D.C.

Program Overview: FLY is an after-school program that currently serves 40 young people between the ages of nine and 17. The program seeks to help youth achieve their educational goals, develop their artistic talents, and expand their leadership roles. FLY takes a holistic, long-term youth development approach aimed at engaging youth in the program year-round for six to 10 years. Participants typically are active for four to eight years, and youth attendance and retention is around 90 percent.

Professional Development and Training Activities (Executive Level): At the executive level, staff has benefited from training in financial management, risk management, project management, human resources, grant writing, grant management, donor cultivation, and solicitation of corporate sponsorship. Specifically, the *Advancing Your Case through the People You Manage* workshop offered by the Management Assistance Group²⁵ assisted FLY leaders to understand how to support outcomes through their organizational culture. In addition, training provided by Fair Chance²⁶, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C., has strengthened FLY's overall structure and internal leadership. This training covered topics such as identifying and preventing staff burnout, engaging in strategic planning, and encouraging the media to recognize youth involved in positive community work. Executive-level staff have also benefited from the Advancing Youth Development Supervisors Training aimed at improving the capacity to provide direct services to youth and information on training required of youth workers to expand that capacity. As a part of the Building Leadership Organizing Communities (BLOC)²⁷ network, executive-level staff members have learned the "best practices" around community building and ways to nurture relationships with other youth workers.

Professional Development and Training Activities (All Staff): In addition to providing in-depth training at the executive level, the organization is committed to the professional development of all program staff. Full-time staff members at FLY receive monthly training. Summer camp counselors receive two weeks of training, and tutors undergo two days of training initially, and receive biweekly support throughout the year. To ensure that all staff members participate in some manner, all training sessions are interactive. Role-playing is often used to build trust and foster understanding among staff. Guest speakers are often brought to avoid "the same talking head training after training." In addition, training frequently incorporates media presentations, including documentaries, news broadcasts, youth-produced print and visual media materials, so that staff members are kept abreast of emerging trends in youth culture. Training received by FLY program staff has focused on:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cultural Education• Classroom Management• Curriculum Development• Learning & Teaching Styles• Collective Expectations• Communication with Youth• Communication with Co-Workers• Conflict Resolution• History of the Organization and Anacostia (the section of Washington, D.C., where the program is based)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• HIV, Substance Abuse, and Pregnancy Education• Confidentiality• Safety• Emergency Procedures/Incident Reporting• Policies & Procedures• Creating Rules WITH Young People• CPR/First Aid• Youth Development• Youth Organizing
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In spite of the extensive training backgrounds of FLY's program staff, the executive leadership identified the following training that it would like for full-time staff members, but have not yet received:

- Midwest Academy: <http://www.midwestacademy.com/>
- SPIN Project: <http://www.spinproject.org/>
- National Youth Organizers Training: http://www.youthec.org/soul/soul_sec/programs/pr-national.html

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