

## **YOUTH WORK: ORGANIZING PATHWAYS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

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*ABSTRACT: Youth workers guide healthy development of children, youth, families and, ultimately, the neighborhoods in which they serve. Youth workers connect youth in positive ways with adults and organize relationships across whole communities to solve problems and meet social challenges. This article explores pathways for the development of youth workers as leaders in the nonprofit sector. Recommendations for high quality certification and training are presented from a summit of 20 youth work leaders convened to report the state of training, certification, higher education, and supports for the field of youth work.*

*Key words: youth work certification, youth work training, youth work in higher education, and youth worker supports for professional development*

Change produces leaders. Leaders generate change.

Strategically, in many communities, youth workers are at the center of organizing change in the trends that impact youth and society.

Youth workers guide healthy development of children, youth, families, and, ultimately, the neighborhoods in which they serve. Youth workers connect youth in positive ways with adults and organize relationships across whole communities to solve problems and meet social challenges.

Our country has the challenge to prepare youth workers for a pathway of leadership in which our communities have the opportunity to promote healthy development, strengthen positive relationships to teach skills and competencies, solve problems, and generate social change.

The United States is one of the few developed nations in the world without a federal youth development policy which spells out community-level programs for youth that are matched to funding streams, and preparation and education of the workers who deliver the services.

Over the decades, efforts to prepare and support leadership development for youth workers and their nonprofit organizations has ebbed and flowed. This has contributed to low pay and education, high turn-over, risky practices, and a public perception that questions the value of training highly skilled youth workers. No matter how well conceived, large scale youth development interventions such as mentoring, after-school and out-of-school time, community organized youth programs, and national service cannot fully succeed in teaching life long skills and competencies for the success of youth if the workers who deliver these interventions are poorly prepared and lack support.

Since government policy has not made a greater investment in youth work, youth workers have been challenged to self-organize their own field. To gain professional integrity, like credentialed teachers and licensed social workers, youth workers must sustain training programs to prepare for service and must teach competencies in training institutes, higher education, and continuing education. A professional field must test and certify the competencies that have been learned in a measurable examination, establish a code of ethics, publish journals to transfer knowledge, and mobilize large scale public support that often becomes codified in legislation, policy and program implementation, and funding streams.

Over the last 25 years in youth work, the field has witnessed starts and stops, renewed hope, and then failure in building the elements for a professional field. What is the result? Youth work has been left with an image as something less than necessary, a kind of afterthought of policy and program implementation, system-level reform, and top-down thinking that has largely ignored the fact that high quality workers are an essential element in empowering the large numbers of youth who need to be served.

On October 17, 2008, with support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, the AED Center for Youth Development convened a summit of 20 leading thinkers and organizers of high quality youth work and certification to review the state of the youth work field. Much to everyone's surprise (since everyone had been busy doing their work rather than meeting with one another), a majority of the elements necessary to sustain and advance the field of youth work were already in place! The challenge would be to implement these advances in every state for each youth worker by better integrating and aligning the efforts to do so. Remarkable! Even three years ago, this would not have been the case. Such growth in the field is so new that these trends have not been reported in the literature or to the public.

At the summit it was realized that there was a stable and growing youth worker professional association with a triennial International Child and Youth Care Conference to transfer knowledge and mobilize leadership. This meeting draws more than 1,500 youth workers from more than one hundred countries. A coalition of members has focused on the next generation and has collaboratively promoted new policy and research for the field. There is a working code of ethics that has been established with cases under regular review, and journals are emerging that actively bring best practice and innovation to the field through the writings of practitioners and scholars.

A National Certification Board has been founded for youth work and has begun to grant certifications based on 250 hours of training, B.A. degree, portfolio of references, and passing a high quality competitive exam that was developed with support from the University of Wisconsin, University of Pittsburgh, and Harvard University. It was normed through research at Kent State University. In the process of establishing the certification, more than 100 sets of youth worker competencies were reviewed and synthesized into a single developmental framework to guide training, research, and practice. Certification continues to grow with two new specialized credentials for workers in after-school and juvenile justice programs.

Only ten years ago, the youth work field was fragmented. Attempts to train and certify involved more than 100 sets of competencies and more than 50 unrelated certification programs—with no examination. Today, the field stands strengthened as certification efforts have coalesced, and training initiatives are now open to collaboration with the powerful opportunity for youth workers to become certified. Corresponding with the advance of certification, there has also been an upsurge in the development of university training programs and institutes for youth workers at the University of Wisconsin, University of Pittsburgh, University of California, University of Minnesota, and Indiana University, among others.

Youth workers have begun to build a profession to significantly change the field. Once focused on diagnosing deficits to solve problems, youth workers now focus on discovering strengths for youth and building skills and competencies. Intervention is no longer top-down or even controlled by adults. Positive youth development promotes collaboration between youth and adults in a developmental process. Youth workers who work in the margins and in contested spaces organizing change with youth have become less a traditional work force and more a part of a movement. They have options for career growth in organizing child, youth, and community change with a role in promoting social equity and economic development.

With a fully articulated, developed, and aligned field, youth workers, who once managed the behaviors of the youth and delivered services in clubs and centers, are now leading the transformation of programs and organizing hubs for positive youth and community development. Yet, much more needs to be done to stabilize and advance the field of youth work with pathways for leadership development and social change.

## **Certification**

Most youth workers today participate in the certification offered by the National Certification Board. Credentials are emerging for after-school and juvenile justice. These certification plans should explore close collaboration to align competencies across setting so that skills would be transferable. Workers need state-to-state and program-to-program reciprocity. An emphasis should be placed on reaching all youth workers in the United States with the core developmental strategies and frameworks for certification.

## **Higher Education**

In the United States, six major universities offer one or more levels of youth worker training from preservice and two-year programs through bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. While these programs have had a huge upsurge in their local regions, no one university has every level of training. Access is poor for many youth workers across the country.

Unlike Canada, which offers full child and youth care education in most regions, a youth worker attempting to become fully trained in the United States could, for example, go to the University of Wisconsin for preservice, Western Washington University for a two year degree, University of Minnesota for a bachelors, University of Pittsburgh for a masters, and Harvard University for a doctorate. Very few youth

workers have been able to follow these circuitous paths.

Immediate consideration should be given to bringing institutions of higher learning together for the purposes of offering a set of degrees based on the competencies that frame professional youth work certification. The full range of necessary courses could readily be made available in a shared degree program made accessible through distance education.

### **Training**

Besides university credit courses, there are four major youth worker training curricula widely used in the community, including the Child and Youth Care Basic Course from the Academy for Competent Youth Work, Advancing Youth Development at AED, the Professionalizing Youth Work series at The University of Oklahoma National Resource Center for Youth Services, and the Overview of Child and Youth Care Course and Advanced Supervision Seminar at the University of Wisconsin Youth Work Learning Center.

A vision should be set to align and sequence these curricula to provide high quality training for preservice, basic, and advanced youth work, and also specialized areas of intervention such as work with families, community organizing, and youth work through national service and afterschool programs.

Technology will play a powerful and instrumental role as workers reach for training on the World Wide Web from the centers where they work with a preference for easily accessible webcasts organized in training topic areas. In most cases, the youth worker curricula, no matter how powerful in terms of developmental content, are still in binders. Resources are needed to move from last generation formats to highly interactive learning that encompasses on-demand access to the World Wide Web. Collaborative efforts could result in a global youth worker curriculum based on the components of these four curricula and developed for use across the country. Afterschool.org is building an on-line, interactive community of practice for youth workers in afterschool settings. This portal can be easily linked to other organization sites and serve as a collaborative training platform.

### **Supports**

The National Certification Board, while an extremely effective high level self-organized initiative, needs infrastructure support to rapidly review new applications and grant certifications, especially in an on-line process.

The Next Gen Coalition should be expanded, and the work to conduct policy analysis and research should be advanced to ensure that we do not duplicate our efforts. Innovative trends need to be considered, such as focusing on youth work as a part of the new global work force and youth work as a self-selected part-time work force in which millennials and baby boomers alike contribute to community change.

The newly coalesced knowledge and practice base of certification and training initiatives that are surging forward can benefit significantly from leadership supports such as coaching and fellowships. In the next iteration of leadership development through youth work, ongoing supports for the field can be strength-

ened with coaching, on-site assessment, supervision, career pathways, and networks so that professional development is synonymous with career development in a changing society.

We may look to the key strengths of youth work, its knowledge base, and capacity to mobilize effective change in neighborhoods as the new presidential administration considers the importance of service and place-based strategies to the social and economic development of youth and communities.

Perhaps most important, the field needs powerful working demonstrations and model evidence-based programs that leverage all the elements of youth work—certification, higher education, training, and supports—to organize the young, diverse leaders of the next generation to discover new strengths, transfer knowledge, and find shared solutions to a rising number of challenges: the large number of disconnected youth who have been failed by public schooling, young people falling into structural poverty, and a younger generation wanting desperately to succeed as leaders in their communities with opportunities in the new global economy.

We leave you with some of the portions of the new leadership developments in the field of youth work brought to the table on October 17:

- Across the country, shortly more than 2,000 youth workers will be trained and certified.
- So many youth work students in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Indiana, and other states have signed up for courses that universities, for the first time in many years, are expanding offerings and utilizing new formats such as webinars and summer institutes.
- New regional efforts have been launched for training youth workers in Ohio, Florida, and California.
- National networks established by organizations and coalitions have come to the forefront in youth work advocacy and research highlighting innovative approaches to community organizing, coaching, and equity issues.

Youth centers, residential centers, clubs, afterschool, and juvenile justice systems are growing together through the latest developmental frameworks of youth work. The coalition of those dedicated to the development of leaders in youth work embrace those of us who have sustained this effort over the past 25 years and the newest youth workers from diverse communities alike—we join together in welcoming youth, families, and communities—into a shared process of leadership development for social change.

We see a day soon when all youth workers in the United States are fully trained and certified. Training and certification as a pathway for leadership in youth work ensures that resources invested in building strategic initiatives and innovation for the purposes of organizing social change will be sustained over the long term and result in quality outcomes—on all fronts. As we look to a diverse nation with a thriving economy propelled by healthy social infrastructure, leadership from youth

workers is instrumental in organizing change for children, youth, families, and community. It all comes down to how we treat one another!

## SUMMIT HIGHLIGHTS

### Mapping the Youth Worker Training and Certification Landscape

#### What are we doing?

##### Certification

##### State Level

- The Child and Youth Care Certification Board established a credentialing program for youth workers employed in a range of settings from afterschool to foster care and piloted the program at Kent State University.

The program is based on competencies drawn from the major practice settings within the field. Those wanting to become certified must have a bachelor's degree, take an examination, and complete 250 hours of training. To date, 243 youth workers have been certified from 13 states and Canada. Of those participating in the program, 59% of youth workers from the United States and 95% of youth workers from Canada have passed. Two thousand youth workers are expected to be certified in the near future.

- The Indiana Youth Development (IYD) Credential is a certification that can be obtained in Indiana.

There are currently two different ways to obtain an IYD, and a third is under development. The standard process is designed for individuals with a high school diploma or GED, and the alternate process is designed for individuals with an associate, bachelor or master degree. Class work, visitations, and a portfolio are required to obtain a certification. Individuals obtaining the credential are almost exclusively from Indiana.

- Massachusetts recently completed a one-year pilot of its School Age and Youth Development (SAYD) credential program with 25 youth workers.

The program is designed to be nonsetting-specific and spans the full continuum of practitioners. The program is similar to the IYD and requires college courses, a portfolio, observations, and an interview.

- Some states have director credentials that are nonage specific and for anyone in child care or youth development. Florida requires that all directors of licensed programs are credentialed.

##### University Level

- University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee's Youth Work Learning Center offers a Youth Work Certificate. In order to obtain the certificate, continuing education

hours and a practicum are required. Courses can be taken on-line or face-to-face. Texas, Maine, Wyoming, Louisiana, and Ohio have similar certificate programs.

## **Training/Degree**

### **State Level**

- PA (Pennsylvania) Pathways is a quality improvement program in which all early learning programs and practitioners are encouraged and supported to improve child outcomes.
- The Academy for Competent Youth Work in Texas offers a “Train the Trainer” program for the “Child and Youth Care: Basic Course,” a 40- to 48-hour curriculum.

The course is also being taught in some colleges.

- The Youth in the CityYear program participates in “Leadership Development Day” and a training academy. They also engage in 1,700 hours of service working with youth.
- The Forum for Youth Investment has a joint venture to manage the Center for Youth Program Quality.

They have a high powered assessment of program quality linked with training and offer modules to help programs improve. They provide training for program managers to assess how their workers are doing, and they are developing coaching protocols on how managers can be better supervisors.

- At AED, the 40-hour Advancing Youth Development curriculum is used by facilitators to deliver youth development trainings to youth workers in almost every state in the Union.
- The Seneca Center, which offers support for emotionally troubled children and their families, has a curriculum which is being taught in community colleges. It focuses more on kin care and foster care as opposed to youth worker training.
- The Youth Coalition is currently making a map of higher education programs in youth related fields with focus on programs in Pennsylvania, Missouri, California, Illinois, and Minnesota.
- In Pennsylvania, Missouri, and Minnesota, Cornerstones for Kids is conducting a study using the TEACH model for early childhood educators.

### **State Level**

Through the program, individuals take college-level courses, and every course they take earns them a raise if they commit to staying there. Cornerstones for Kids is attempting to build a youth-worker model. They are also working to identify course work available in institutions of higher education and resources to pay for scholarships.

- The National Resource Center for Youth Services at The University of Oklahoma has a Trainer Certificate curriculum for the *Residential Child and Youth Care Professional* series that is used in most states, especially for preservice preparation.
- The Forum for Youth Investment will be conducting a national study to map the availability of curriculums and training programs.
- The Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western University offers a fellowship program that includes training and support.

The fellowship involves 40 to 50 hours of training, and fellows must put a plan into place for after their fellowship. After a three month period, fellows gets a coach (i.e., CEOs, principals) to work with them a few hours a month for six months. Fellows also meets in small groups. The program offers networking events such as "speed networking."

- The Cleveland Foundation has launched a youth movement called "My Com: My Commitment, My Community."

The program connects young people ages 5-18 with adults. The program utilizes the High/Scope model and draws on several other programs as well.

- The Robert Bowne Foundation funds the Afterschool Matters Initiative at Wellesley College, which consists of a practitioner fellowship program, a journal publication, a research grantee program, and research roundtables.

The board of the foundation hopes to roll out the program nationally.

- Bonnie Brae, which serves high risk males in New Jersey, offers an optional week-long training for their staff.

Once staff complete the training, they receive an increase in salary. Turn-over among staff who complete the training has been far less than turn-over for other staff.

- While not specifically for youth workers, American Humanics hosts the American Humanics Management/Leadership Institute (AHMI) for those interested in nonprofit management and leadership education.



### **University Level**

- University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee offers a 40-hour continuing education Foundations course in youth work that takes a competency-based approach.
- Indiana State University offers a concentration in Recreation Management and Youth Leadership. The School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation is looking into creating a major.
- Purdue University offers a major in Youth, Adult, and Family Services, but it does not meet all competencies.
- University of Pittsburgh is planning a doctoral program in Program Design and Leadership and has a summer institute. They also have a “Train the Trainer” program for master’s and administrative level professionals that is being expanded to include an online version. The University also offers a concentration in child and youth work.

## **GATHERING PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHTS**

### **1. How do training and certification make a difference in the quality of the youth work?**

**Research (i.e., National Day Care Study) shows that well prepared workers in the area of development are linked to positive outcomes among youth.**

- The Harvard Family Research Project found that training and certification is linked to increasing and recruiting youth workers, which leads to better outcomes.
- The Massachusetts After School Research Study looked at credentials of staff and found that staff with higher degrees could produce more positive outcomes.

### **2. How do we build a better leadership pathway for youth workers?**

- Avoid separate initiatives. Aim for something more integrated. Connect all parts of the continuum.
- Figure out ways to connect investments. Use breadth strategy and depth strategy.
- Make sure a degree is valued highly.
- Go beyond certification.
- Strengthen higher education. Atlantic Philanthropies should stimulate the response in higher education.

- Employ a systemic, integrated approach. Establish a career ladder that follows processes of maturity with links between associate's degree, bachelor's degree, and certification programs.
- Encourage agencies to legislate.
- Emphasize on front-line supervisors.
- Create more opportunities for leaders to sit together, put issues on the table, and work them out.
- Emphasize the importance of mentoring, formal training, or informal technical assistance.
- Establish partnership with academics so that practitioners can get educated and education can lead to workforce retention. Putting these two pieces together is crucial.
- Connect workforce to academics, but do not require a youth work degree. This leaves room for flexibility.

### NEXT STEPS

#### Focus

- Decide what the field should be focusing on.
- Look at the field as a lifespan field. There is a lack of empowerment when we focus only on one age group. This would make it a true profession of its own.
- Decide whether to drive toward certification or education pathway models, or both?
- Look into 4-H peer communities and other learning communities (model).
- Look into the afterschool sector's approach that their work is not a career but a pipeline into teaching.
- Bring the afterschool sector of the field in.
- Ask people pursuing a certificate or degree in youth work why they are doing it (i.e., what are they getting out of it, considering existing salaries?).

#### Collaboration

- Encourage national collaboration and state-agency partnerships.
- Form partnerships between universities and agencies such as collaborating with county agencies to provide stipends to students to get a bachelor's or master's degree to work in county settings.
- Recognize that state-agency partners strengthen the youth work infrastructure.

### Support for Current Staff

- Promote and compensate a higher degree.
- Supervise and recognize workers to keeping them in the field.

A study conducted among 2000 frontline workers found that workers are not looking for additional training, but they want someone to recognize their certificate or degree. Another study done of training versus support, found that quality of supervision such as when supervisor stayed on the job and was interested and engaged in helping staff grow is what encouraged the most gains among youth workers.

- Give youth workers room to make occupational and professional connections.
- Create informal support networks.
- Training
  - Seek more professional educators. For example, there are 500 students majoring in youth work at the University of Minnesota, but there are no professors of youth work.
  - Focus on development as opposed to classroom management.
  - Create a more standardized curriculum.
  - Push for certifications.
  - Support students at the associate's degree level and help them into career pathways.
  - Have a strong network of in-service training for county workers.
  - Offer leadership training.
  - Enact legislation to allow training dollars to be used for nonprofits.

### Other

- Create a social marketing strategy for policy makers and general public, showing importance of the issue.
- Fund quality rating systems to include youth work. Existing rating systems are primarily for early education.

This summit was convened with resources from The Atlantic Philanthropies with additional support from Cornerstones Consulting, Inc.

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<b>SKILL TRANSFER</b>
<b>Training</b>
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<b>KNOWLEDGE</b>
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<b>COACHING &amp; SUPPORT</b>
<b>Recognition, Supervision, Supports</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership Development</li> <li>• Supervision</li> <li>• Networks</li> <li>• Fellowships</li> <li>• In-service</li> <li>• Stipends</li> <li>• Mentors</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• i.e., My Community</li> <li>• Afterschool Matters Initiative; Youth Worker Institute, 4-H</li> </ul>