MEETING THE NEEDS OF YOUTH-AT-RISK IN CANADA:

A SUMMARY OF THE LEARNINGS

Our mission is to help the people of Canada
maintain and improve their health.

Health Canada

For additional copies, please contact:

Publications
Health Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0K9

Tel: (613) 954-5995
Fax: (613) 941-5366

This publication is also available on Internet at the following address:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/alcohol-otherdrugs

It can be made available in/on computer diskette/large print/audio cassette/braille, upon request.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not
necessarily reflect the views of Health Canada.

Ce document est aussi offert en français sous le titre :
Répondre aux besoins des jeunes à risque au Canada : Un résumé des leçons à retenir

Meeting the Needs of
Youth-at-Risk in Canada:

A Summary of the Learnings

Office of Alcohol, Drugs, and Dependency Issues
Health Canada

)))))) canada's drug strategy

Introduction

This document is intended as a complement to the report entitled "Meeting the Needs of Youth-at-Risk in Canada: Learnings from a National Community Development Project". The national community development project for youth-at-risk took place from late 1994 until early 1996. The goal of the project was to assist five sites from across Canada to undertake community development processes and activities, to document their challenges and successes, and to make this information available to other Canadian communities interested in undertaking similar processes. A number of learnings, corresponding to the experiences of the various projects involved, is provided throughout the final report. This document provides a list of the learnings only for quick reference.

Developing and Maintaining the Group

➤ Success in youth-based community development initiatives is enhanced when adults and youth are involved in both the management and the operational level in a partnership-sharing arrangement.

➤ One of the primary responsibilities of the steering committee (or other governing body) is to ensure that there is clear focus to the community development work.

➤ Youth and adults need to work together to develop concrete community action strategies. The mix of adults and youth brings balance to group capability.

➤ Youth need time in community development group formation to address their own needs prior to addressing the youth issues of the larger community.

➤ Youth recruitment and retention has a greater chance of success when youth are given concrete project-related jobs to perform that they perceive as being important.

➤ Both youth and adults play an essential role in group development. Both seem to be necessary for community development projects to succeed.

➤ One of the key roles of adults in youth-based community development is that of affirming the work done by youth.

➤ Adults bring a number of important assets to the group, including organizational skills, connections to the wider community and knowledge of how to achieve the objectives of the project.

➤ Where possible, shared leadership responsibility between paid coordinators, adults and youth in project coordination is desirable. This is particularly the case when each is aware and respectful of the unique role the other is playing in the achievement of project goals.

➤ The maintenance of youth-based community development groups is enhanced by having full-time, paid staff but may lessen community ownership for the issues. Depending on the size of the project, having full-time youth and adult paid staff members enhances the chance of success even further.

➤ The presence of adult volunteers lets youth know that there are adults in the community who care about youth issues and who are willing to contribute their time and energy to addressing them.

➤ Formal and informal training should occur early in group development in such things as how to run meetings, communication skills, conflict resolution, facilitation skills, public speaking, writing, motivational skills and group dynamics.

Connecting to the Target Audience

➤ Group members, particularly youth, will be more motivated to stay involved in the group when there is a clear sense of direction and concrete tasks to perform.

➤ Ongoing contact between the community development project and the youth-at-risk target population must be created in a way most suited to the needs of the target population.

➤ One of the most effective ways for the project to maintain contact with the target population is to act as a broker or liaison between these youth and the community partners who are asking for youth input.

➤ The project office should be located in a setting which is safe, non-threatening, and accessible to both youth and adults.

➤ Projects with multiple community sites must have the necessary transportation, communication and staff resources to provide the kind of support necessary to do community development with youth.

Developing Group Capacity

➤ Working on youth issues with community partners provides community development group members with an opportunity to gain the knowledge, skills and experience they need to do this kind of work. This helps develop group capacity.

➤ The community development group is enriched by having a broad mix of youth and adults, not all of whom are from the target population.

➤ Inviting members to the group who have contacts with key stakeholders in the community is important in increasing the group's capacity to eventually form partnerships.

➤ Experiential learning opportunities in the community should be encouraged with support by coaches or mentors who can debrief with the group participant in order to identify the lessons learned.

➤ Whether it is a spontaneous development or a planned activity, some kind of healing capability will develop within the group where youth-at-risk are involved. This should be encouraged as a necessary precondition to further capacity building.

Developing Legitimacy

➤ In order for the community development group to gain legitimacy, the community partners must recognize that the group brings a perspective on youth issues that is needed for the solution to community problems related to youth.

➤ The community development group must recognize its own legitimacy first and then actively promote its assets to the community at large, specifically to potential future partners.

➤ Before the community development group can be recognized as a full and equal partner in the community, it must shift its focus away from its own individual needs solely and turn toward the broader needs of the community.

➤ The role of the community development group is to link up potential partners in the community with the youth-at-risk target population, not to perform this function itself.

➤ The primary focus of the community development group is to empower youth-at-risk to make their own decisions, not to be a service provider or a spokesperson for its members or the youth-at-risk target popuation.

➤ To achieve legitimacy in the large community, the community development group must maintain a balance between the needs of the partners and those of the target group.

➤ The community development group should see itself as a helper in the problem-solving process and should receive structured training in problem-solving techniques.

➤ Youth are not only ready to move beyond their own issues into larger community issues, but want to do so and learn valuable lessons from the experience. They seem to know intuitively when this should happen.

➤ Rather than waiting for youth to be "ready," trial by fire under a properly coached or tutored situation is often the best approach.

Negotiating and Contracting Partnerships

➤ Equality in partnership is created when both parties see that they need one another to solve a commonly defined problem.

➤ Youth-based, community development projects are much more likely to succeed when they are started by individuals and groups from within the community.

➤ Health, education and social service providers have proven to be the most reluctant partners in including youth-based projects in their decision-making and policy discussions.

➤ Community development groups should include a broad definition of potential community partners in their working strategy. These should include media, corporate and business partners as well as government and non-government agencies.

➤ The role for the community development group in partnership meetings is to provide problem-solving assistance, linkages with the target group and up-to-date information on the youth-at-risk issues. By keeping this in mind, the group representatives will be less likely to be co-opted by the powerful interests in the community.

➤ The community development groups should be constantly scanning the environment to identify individuals and groups who may have a need for their assistance.