

Findings From
ACT for YOUTH

2000 to
2006

ACT for Youth Centers of Excellence

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Acknowledgement

The Centers of Excellence thank the New York State Department of Health for their vision, leadership, and support of this innovative initiative, recognizing that our children and youth are truly New York's greatest resource.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ACT for Youth

In 2000, the New York State Department of Health launched an innovative and ambitious initiative aimed at enhancing the lives of youth through community-level change and collaboration. Called *Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth*, the initiative was developed in cooperation with Partners for Children, a collaboration of public and private sector partners focused on improving health, education, and other outcomes for children and adolescents in New York State. The ACT for Youth initiative promotes the health and well being of adolescents by transforming the contexts within which they live. The long-term goals of the initiative include prevention of violence, abuse, and risky sexual activity among young people ages 10-19 by fostering a positive youth development approach that strengthens communities and provides all young people with opportunities to thrive. The findings after five years of the ACT for Youth initiative endorse the promise of youth development strategies for creating long-term change. Through ACT for Youth, a solid baseline of optimism and positive change for community-level youth development has been established in New York State.

The New York State Department of Health selected eleven communities to develop cross-sector community development partnerships (CDP) that served as the primary vehicle driving youth development oriented change. These communities included: the Bronx, Brooklyn, Yonkers, Columbia County, Greene County, Capital District (Albany, Rensselaer, and Schenectady), Onondaga County, Otsego County, Cattaraugus County, Jefferson County, and Erie County. To assist these communities and the state with this large-scale initiative, two Centers

of Excellence provided training, technical assistance, and evaluation support. In the Downstate region, the Center of Excellence was administered from the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center. The Upstate region was led by a collaboration among Cornell University's Family Life Development Center, the University of Rochester Division of Adolescent Medicine, and the New York State Center for School Safety. The work of the CDPs focused around the achievement of five outcomes:

1. ***Enhance and maintain the community development partnership***
2. ***Increase services, opportunities, and supports for young people***
3. ***Increase youth engagement***
4. ***Organizational change***
5. ***Community policy change***

The Centers of Excellence provided training and technical assistance to CDPs on these outcomes and conducted periodic evaluations to assess progress toward their achievement.

Evaluation

The ACT for Youth initiative put into practice core elements of youth development theory. The five-year evaluation plan demonstrated progress toward achieving the five core outcomes listed above by illustrating changes in the way communities worked together to serve and include youth. Central to the evaluation of ACT for Youth was an examination of the role that the community partnerships played in this process – how they formed, functioned, and operated, and how they were sustained. Data collection tools and approaches included quantitative and qualitative methods to gather information from a broad number of key stakeholders and constituents at various points in time over the course of the initiative.

Key Findings

The evaluation efforts conducted over five years yielded important descriptions of community-level change. There was notable progress in each outcome area and lessons to inform similar efforts in the future were derived. In brief, the most instructive findings include:

- ***New and improved cross-sector community partnerships are operational and represent systems working together, many for the first time.*** Almost all sites created a partnership although each varied in functionality and effectiveness. These partnerships were the essential vehicle driving the initiative at the community level.
- ***All community partnerships learned a great deal about what positive youth development means,*** and have a clearer understanding of how to create sustainable momentum and change.
- ***All communities strengthened and created services, opportunities, and supports that enabled youth to transition to adulthood*** with increased competencies, confidence, and positive experiences on which to build.
- ***Communities have a broader understanding of youth voice*** and understand the activities and mechanisms that allow youth to have voice, choice, and increased responsibilities in their environment and lives.
- ***Substantial progress was made toward increasing authentic youth engagement efforts beyond token inclusion of young people.*** All sites progressed in viewing youth as resources and/or experts, but high-level youth engagement where youth were equal partners was a challenging, yet necessary process for many of the CDPs. Similar to the process of creating sustainable community policy

change, a cultural shift away from deeply embedded societal norms of youth-adult interaction. This shift requires tenacity and additional committed resources beyond the original five year plan.

- ***New positive strategies and relationships emerged with non-traditional and sometimes hard to engage partners*** such as schools, justice/law enforcement, faith-based groups, parents, and business/economic development. Particularly hard-to-reach constituencies such as education and law enforcement made significant progress in coming to the table to understand environment and its impact on positive youth development. There is still room for improvement in engaging these constituencies; however, ACT for Youth broke barriers and forged new commonalities among these key stakeholder groups.
- ***Funder support of positive youth development initiatives is more apparent today than when this process began five years ago.*** Cross-sector fertilization has occurred. Local economic development, school board, and juvenile justice plans, as well as other funding proposals, are more likely to ask for and fund initiatives where there will be a positive demonstrated impact for community youth.

Lessons Learned

A number of lessons were learned through the ACT for Youth initiative that can inform future iterations of this work in New York State and beyond. Some of the most important lessons include:

- ***Devote early attention to group processes and structure.*** Once a partnership is formed, the group processes must be clearly laid out. Clearly defining and articulating roles, responsibilities, and expectations from the start was instrumental to success. Memorandums of

understanding were helpful. Subcommittees within the partnership were also beneficial. Starting early on with a joint project that gets people working together and invested in the outcome was a great way to build group trust and capacity.

- ***Involve a diverse array of partners and community stakeholders, especially non-traditional and hard-to-engage partners.*** CDPs that were successful in creating community-level change recognized the importance of drawing diverse organizations into their partnership at a very early stage. A large web of stakeholders not only allowed for multiple perspectives on promoting a community youth development agenda, but also gave partnerships the ability to leverage considerably larger networks of individuals and resources.
- ***Utilize youth-adult partnerships.*** Programs, services, and activities planned through youth-adult partnerships, rather than by adults alone, are more innovative and have the potential to engage more youth. Youth-adult partnerships are an authentic and essential mechanism for achieving broad youth development goals.
- ***Provide universally accessible activities and services for youth: do not limit programs to specific “at risk” or “high risk” groups.*** Such specific targeting leads to stigma and decreased youth engagement. Increased levels of authentic youth engagement were noted when services and programs were not offered as part of a “service package” but rather framed as an exciting set of opportunities for youth to get involved in their community.
- ***Foster youth action at all levels of the initiative.*** Youth action is critical to the process of creating and sustaining community policy change. Without an active and vocal cadre of youth voicing their needs and opinions, community policy change is very unlikely! Youth action must be infused at all levels of the initiative otherwise the momentum will lose adhesion and will quickly falter.

- ***Understand that five years is a challenging time frame for new partnerships to achieve exemplary, sustainable community policy change.*** Many CDPs are now beginning to see community-level changes emerging as a result of the work completed over the past five years. The CDPs helped develop and establish optimism and positive change for community-level youth development in New York State. Continued support plays an important role in ensuring that current change efforts become institutionalized within the community. ●

INTRODUCTION

Background

The health of our youth mirrors and directly impacts the health of our country. Today's youth are tomorrow's workforce, parents, and leaders. The future of youth is shaped by the opportunities we create for them today.

In the late 1990s, the New York State Department of Health began a critical examination of its youth-serving programs and the approaches they exemplified in communities across the state. Building on lessons learned from categorical risk-reduction approaches, the Department considered new ways to foster optimum health and well being for New York State youth. Two principal themes emerged:

- Youth-serving programs should take a positive approach to youth; one that considers their strengths and potential rather than highlights their less positive or “risky” behaviors.
- In order to reach all youth and achieve long-term change, there must be an extensive shift in consciousness at all levels of government and in all sectors of communities. There needed to be a shift in the way all state level policy makers and segments of the community viewed and interacted with youth.

The Department of Health developed a new initiative using a Youth Development approach to impact a myriad of risk behaviors and concerns. By building opportunities for youth, addressing self-esteem, recognizing and building on assets, and generally viewing youth more positively, the aim was to address the root causes of unhealthy and risky behaviors.

ACT for Youth

In 2000, the New York State Department of Health launched an innovative and ambi-

tious initiative aimed at enhancing the lives of youth through community-level change and collaboration. Called *Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth*, the initiative was developed in cooperation with Partners for Children, a collaboration of public and private sector partners focused on improving health, education, and other outcomes for children and adolescents in New York State. The ACT initiative embodies a new framework for promoting the health and well being of youth, policy development, and community change.

The ACT for Youth initiative promotes the health and well being of adolescents by transforming the contexts within which they live. The long-term goal of the initiative is to foster a positive youth development approach that strengthens communities and provides all young people with opportunities to thrive.

The Role of Community Mobilization

At its inception, the ACT for Youth initiative was broadly designed “to foster models of community mobilization to build and enhance comprehensive prevention systems focusing on youth and their families” (New York State Department of Health, ACT for Youth Request for Application, 1998). Building on youth development theory, research, and practice, the strategy was to form Community Development Partnerships (CDPs), with cross-sector community involvement that engaged a broad spectrum of stakeholders and represented diverse interests and concerns. These community collaborations were to implement comprehensive and integrated prevention and youth development strategies by creating environmental systemic changes in order to improve health and well being and reduce negative outcomes for youth. The ACT for Youth CDP was at the heart of the initiative and was the central vehicle for creating community change. These partnerships were ideally to occur across social, economic, and civic

sectors and focus on creating enduring collaborations aimed at providing young people developmentally supportive opportunities to feel safe and connected to adults and community institutions, and to become active agents in their lives and communities.

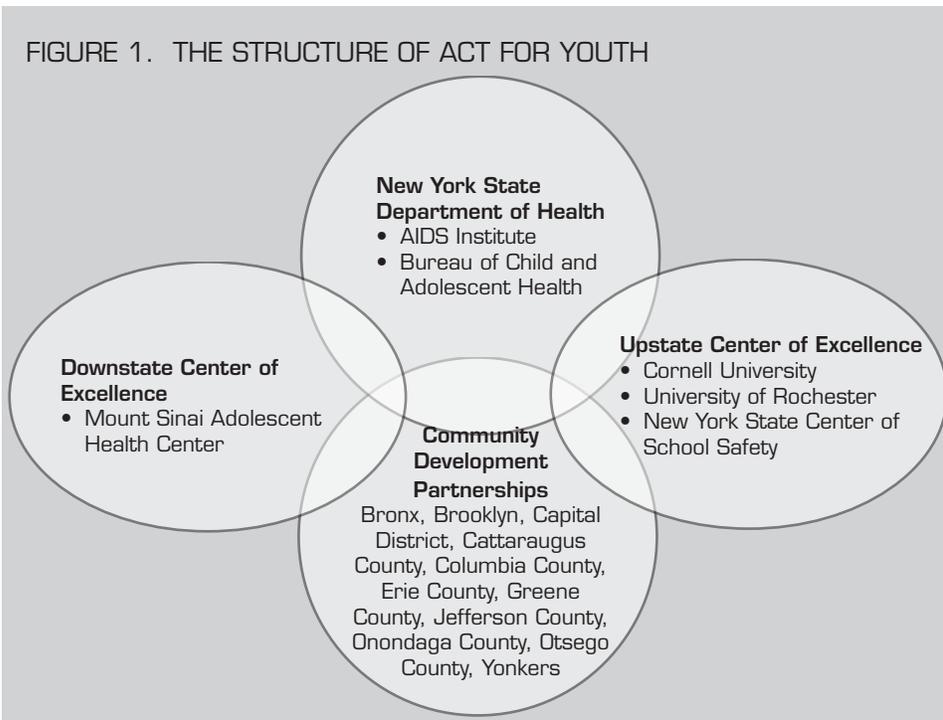
The Structure of ACT for Youth

ACT for Youth was jointly funded and managed by two centers within the NYS Department of Health (DOH): the Center for Community Health and the AIDS Institute. More specifically, DOH staff in the Bureau of Child and Adolescent Health and the Adolescent HIV Prevention Services Unit were responsible for the day-to-day management of ACT. Funding supported the creation and maintenance of 11 Community Development Partnerships across the state. The CDPs were located in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Yonkers, Greene County, Columbia County, Capital District

(Albany, Schenectady, Rensselaer Counties), Otsego County, Jefferson County, Onondaga County, Cattaraugus County, and Erie County.

An innovative feature of the initiative was the establishment of two Regional Centers of Excellence. The Downstate Center was located at the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center; the Upstate Center was based at Cornell University’s Family Life Development Center in collaboration with University of Rochester Division of Adolescent Medicine and the New York State Center for School Safety. The Centers were responsible for providing resources and technical assistance to the CDPs in their efforts to implement and sustain positive youth development in their communities. The goals of the Centers of Excellence were to:

- Provide technical assistance and training
- Provide information on research and best practices



- Promote consistency in planning and evaluation
- Assist the Department of Health and its state-level partners in promoting a positive youth development agenda for New York State

In close collaboration with DOH staff, the Centers of Excellence worked together to provide a uniform approach in their support of the CDPs. In the initial stage of ACT, the Centers focused their efforts on CDPs in their geographic areas. The Downstate Center worked primarily with CDPs in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Yonkers, Greene County, and Columbia County. The Upstate Center worked with CDPs in the Capital District, Otsego, Onondaga, Jefferson, Cattaraugus, and Erie Counties.

Over time, this geographic division of labor was replaced by a system in which any and all of the CDPs could access the resources and services of each of the two Centers. This collaborative approach that evolved among the ACT for Youth participants (DOH, Centers of Excellence, CDPs) was evidenced by such activities as joint site visits to the CDP communities, regular meetings and planning retreats with DOH and Center staff, periodic meetings of the CDPs with DOH and the Centers, joint training for the CDPs conducted by staff from both Centers, and the planning and execution of joint and complementary evaluation activities (as demonstrated in this final report).

Goals and Outcomes

Although each CDP was unique in terms of its composition and approach, all used the following five core outcomes to guide the planning and evaluation of their work:

1. **Enhance and maintain the CDP:** improved collaboration among partners through increased communication, outreach to different sectors of the

community, involving all partners in CDP decision-making.

2. **Increased services, opportunities, and supports for young people:** new opportunities for young people in family, school, and community; new or strengthened support services; and new or enhanced activities promoting positive youth outcomes;
3. **Increased youth engagement:** new opportunities for young people to contribute to their community, including service work, advocacy, and leadership;
4. **Organizational change:** changes among community organizations and institutions reflecting youth development principles, including changes in organizational structures, philosophy, tools, and physical environments; and
5. **Community policy change:** policy changes reflecting youth development principles in community institutions such as schools, townships, city government, and county government.

This report will describe how ACT for Youth unfolded over time, capturing both individual CDP experiences and identifying common themes and lessons learned across all of the sites. It is intended to be of value to other communities interested in implementing similar efforts and contribute to the youth development knowledge base regarding implementation of best practices in youth development. The next section provides the theoretical and empirical context out of which the ACT for Youth Initiative evolved.

What is Youth Development?

The youth development framework is a descendant of resilience studies conducted in the early 1980s by scholars who began to explore why some children and youth

achieved a healthy, even happy, adulthood despite facing serious adversity (Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1992). Resiliency research identified protective factors that promoted well being and demonstrated the importance of positive youth outcomes such as competencies, connectedness, and self-image (Werner et al., 1992; Resnick, Bearman, & Blum, 1997) for all youth, especially youth facing extra challenges and environmental hardships. It also evolved from best practices/lessons learned in the prevention field prior to the 1990s: cross agency collaboration, client-driven program planning and services, changes in restrictions on categorical funding, and the acknowledgment of the interwoven roles of families, classrooms, schools, peers, neighborhoods, and larger communities in influencing outcomes of children and adolescents (Wynn, Costello, Halpern, & Richman, 1994).

Youth development has been defined in many ways by scholars, practitioners, and policy makers (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1998; Kirby & Coyle, 1997; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2000; Eccles et al., 2002). Most experts view positive youth development not as a specific program model, but as an overarching framework that can be used to assure that all youth encounter an ample supply of services, opportunities, and supports as they move through their daily lives. It involves building and mobilizing existing community resources in ways that maximize the likelihood that each young person in the community will encounter multiple opportunities to build on existing skills, meet developmental needs, and serve as useful and valued members of their communities. This concept departs from more traditional prevention strategies that have focused on the deficits of youth, viewing them as problems to be fixed, rather than resources to be developed (Pittman, 2000; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 1998). Positive community-

level youth development involves creating approaches that reach all youth rather than only those believed to possess a particular risk profile.

Although youth development in its broadest form is best described as a community-level endeavor, individual programs can use core youth development principles by emphasizing the following key youth development elements (Whitlock, 2001):

- **Positive youth outcomes focus:** Families, schools, and communities prepare their young people for adulthood by building on the competencies and values youth need to become healthy and productive adults. Positive youth outcomes include competencies (e.g., social, emotional, vocational, academic), self-confidence, connectedness (attachment to community, family, friends), character, compassion and contribution.
- **Youth engagement and youth voice:** Young people have meaningful roles in family, school, and the community, where their contributions make a difference. These contributions can include service, consulting with adults in planning, and shared leadership. Sometimes organizations and institutions need to try new ways of working to take full advantage of the contributions young people can make.
- **Inclusiveness:** Services, opportunities, and supports are available to all young people in the community. At the same time, care is taken to assure that the young people requiring high levels of support (e.g., youth in foster care) are reached.
- **Long-term involvement:** Developmentally appropriate services, opportunities, and supports are available for young people across the age spectrum. In other words, the supports from the community are long-term, reflect the developmental needs of young people, and avoid

setting young people up for “aging out” of needed supports.

- **Community involvement:** The creation of a youth-friendly community involves all sectors of the community, beyond human service and youth program providers to include other community organizations and sectors (faith-based organizations, law enforcement/justice system, businesses).
- **Collaboration:** Varied partners work together to build a comprehensive and coordinated network of services, opportunities, and support. This requires sharing resources and accountability for shared goals, and sometimes this requires participants to work in new ways.

In summary, youth development builds on traditional youth service approaches by emphasizing long-term, systemic strategies for cultivating qualities and traits desirable in young people through the creation of environments that support their developmental needs and capacities. It is founded on the belief that young people thrive when they are developmentally supported across all sectors of the community – including school, youth-serving agencies, faith-based organizations, government, business and more.

The Research Base

The youth development approach is strongly supported in theory and practice by existing and continuously emerging research in fields as varied as public health, social work, and organizational behavior. Empirically documented outcomes of the youth development approach include:

- **Youth development approaches increase positive behavior outcomes and decrease problem behaviors.** In an evaluation of 25 youth development programs, 24 showed significant reduction in problem behaviors including drug and alcohol use, school misbehavior,

aggressive behavior, violence, truancy, high-risk sexual behavior, and smoking. The most effective programs sought to strengthen social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral competencies, as well as self-efficacy, and family and community norms for health, social, and individual behavior (Catalano, Loeber, McKinney, & United States Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999; Eccles et al., 2002).

- **Environment is crucial in promoting positive development.** Research indicates that adolescents’ social environment must fit with their developmental needs. Age-appropriate programming, services, and opportunities must be available and accessible to adolescents throughout their development (Eccles et al., 1993). Youth development practice considers the fit between developmental needs and community characteristics, institutional factors, and opportunities necessary for healthy development of young people (Diaz, Peake, Surko, & Bhandarkar, in press).
- **Working together creates synergy between youth and adults.** A recent study of 15 organizations found that mutual contributions of youth and adults can result in a new power that propels decision-making groups to greater innovation and productivity (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000).
- **Supportive, caring relationships are crucial protective factors.** Large-scale evaluation efforts such as the Big Brother Big Sister impact study demonstrate the positive outcomes of youth development principles, especially the essential role of caring adults in the lives of young people (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995). This well known mentoring program demonstrates increased levels of school achievement and attendance, as well as reduced drug use initiation and violence.

- **Young people are experts about themselves.** Generally, research fails to understand risk-taking from a young person’s point of view and therefore is not informative about intervention and prevention (Zaslow & Takanishi, 1993). Failure to obtain youth perspectives on their health risks and needs can result in ineffective and inadequate services (Blum, McNeely, & Nonnemaker, 2001).
- **Adolescents must be active participants in program design/administration, not just consumers.** The incorporation of youth voice can lead to organizational change (Peake, Surko, Epstein, & Medeiros, in press).

Youth Development approaches increase positive behavior outcomes and decrease problem behaviors. The ACT for Youth initiative draws its structure from this important principle and seeks to create long-term, sustainable changes that benefit young people in communities across New York State.

The following sections of this report first outline the evaluation approach, then highlight significant findings and lessons learned from each outcome area. ●

FIGURE 2. LINK BETWEEN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH AND ACT FOR YOUTH

The Research	ACT for Youth
1. Environment is crucial in promoting positive development.	1. With multi-sector collaboration as the major vehicle driving the initiative at the community level, ACT for Youth establishes a structure and a framework that allows for focused, positive changes to young people’s environment. The introduction of this structure holds the potential of facilitating organizational and community policy change, which in turn makes substantial environmental shifts that better support youth.
2. Working together promotes synergy between youth and adults. Supportive caring relationships are crucial protective factors.	2. A focus on increased services, opportunities and supports coupled with emphasis on youth engagement opens the door for the development of youth-adult relationships that benefit youth, adults and organizations in ACT for Youth communities.
3. Adolescents are active participants, not just consumers.	3. Youth engagement strategies, which are a major component of the initiative, require youth to move beyond traditional “receiver” mode to active participation to help identify and define issues important to youth well-being.
4. Young people are experts about themselves.	4. The structure of ACT for Youth invites young people to the table as partners in their own successful development.

EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Background

Evaluation has been an integral component of the ACT for Youth initiative since its inception. At the state-wide start up meeting held in July 2000, a joint evaluation team was formed representing members of both the Upstate and Downstate Centers of Excellence to ensure that a standardized approach would be carried out across the eleven Community Development Partnerships (CDPs). Throughout the past four years, the Centers of Excellence worked closely in planning and carrying out evaluation activities designed to understand and document the effectiveness and reach of the initiative.

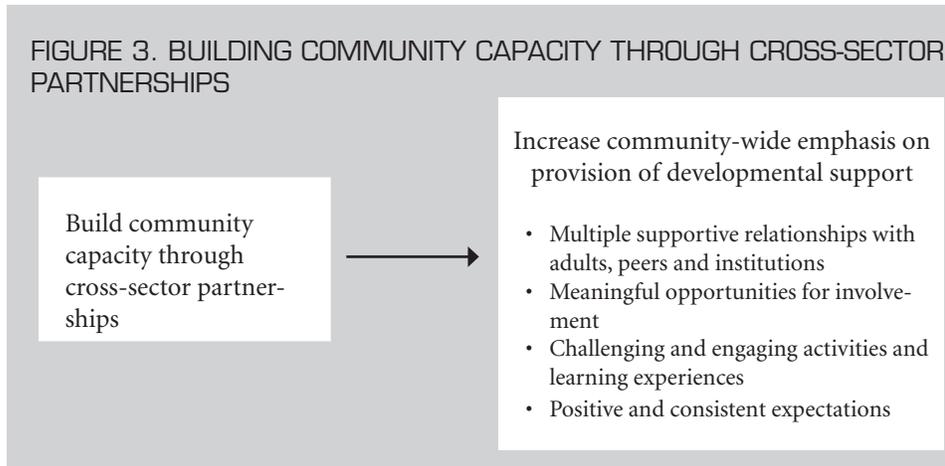
The first project involved the development of a needs assessment to obtain a baseline picture of the eleven partnerships. This information was used by the Centers of Excellence to tailor their training and technical assistance efforts to specific identified needs within the communities. A resounding finding expressed across all sites was the need for information, resources, and support around program evaluation. Consequently, during year one, each Center developed and conducted an intensive two-day evaluation training which was delivered to the communities in February 2001. The intent was to build the capacity of the CDPs to carry out evaluation activities that would inform their planning and improve the quality of their efforts to implement community-wide youth development strategies. These well attended trainings familiarized CDPs with core concepts and approaches to program evaluation and also provided CDPs with concrete tools and resources to assist their work. A special focus of the training was to assist each CDP in developing a program theory/ logic model of their ACT for Youth

effort which could be used for planning and evaluation purposes.

Evaluation Outcome Areas

The ACT for Youth initiative was intended to put into practice core elements of youth development theory. As described in the previous section, the initiative's long term goals were to alter external environments in order to reduce negative outcomes and increase positive outcomes for youth. The five-year evaluation plan aimed to demonstrate progress toward achieving these outcomes by illustrating changes in the way communities worked together to serve and include youth. Central to the evaluation is an examination of the role that the community partnerships played in this process – from how they formed, functioned, and operated to how they eventually sustained themselves.

The initiative focused on two key features of the youth development framework depicted in Figure 3: building community capacity through cross-sector partnerships, and infusing community programs, institutions, leaders, and citizens with an understanding of and appreciation for the need to provide developmental support. For schools, youth-serving agencies, and programs this entailed changing not only key outcomes, but adopting the youth development emphasis on the provision of developmental support as a central means through which they achieve their programmatic objectives. The initiative aimed broadly to create community partnerships, infuse and generate the youth development approach into existing and new youth focused effort across the community, and create more numerous and advanced opportunities for active youth engagement within community sectors. As such, the Centers of Excellence evaluation objectives were to monitor and understand patterns across all the CDP sites as they progressed



in the following five core outcome areas:

1. Creation, enhancement, and maintenance of the community partnerships.
2. Increased community-wide emphasis on provision of developmental supports and opportunities for all youth.
3. Creation of more numerous and more advanced opportunities for youth to be actively engaged within youth-serving programs and across a variety of community sectors.
4. Organizational change reflective of core youth development principles.
5. Community governance structures and policies that are more reflective of core youth development principles.*

Evaluation Strategy

The Centers of Excellence adopted an evaluation plan aimed at assessing the evaluation outcome areas described above. To accomplish this task, Centers of Excellence staff systematically designed tools and collected data from the partnerships to track the nature of the initiative as it unfolded in each CDP (process monitoring), determine the extent to which the CDPs were imple-

mented as intended (process evaluation), and determine if immediate outcomes (cross sector community-wide adoption of youth development principles) were accomplished (outcome monitoring). The evaluation plan called for utilizing multiple data sources, methods, and analytical strategies to address central questions associated with each of the five outcome areas.

Data Collection Tools and Strategies

Data collection tools and approaches included quantitative and qualitative methods and gathered information from a broad number of diverse key stakeholders and constituents. The sheer size and nature of the ACT for Youth initiative prohibited obtaining a sampling frame that would be complete enough to fully and accurately assess how each CDP evolved or its full effects within the community. However, by using multiple data collection tools and methods and diversifying the respondent base, the evaluation findings document patterns and identify trends across the CDPs that illuminate the effectiveness of the ACT for Youth initiative. The multiple sources used to collect evaluation data are summarized below.

* Core youth development principles of particular importance here include: emphasis on positive outcomes as well as negative outcomes, emphasis on provision of developmental support, and enhanced youth participation and engagement

Data Sources

Quarterly Reports

All CDPs completed reports on a quarterly basis that documented progress toward achieving their work plan objectives during each of the five contract years. These reports, submitted to the DOH for monitoring and accountability purposes, provided an extensive source of process evaluation data and included information on activities undertaken to achieve objectives, barriers or problems encountered and steps taken to address them, as well as progress in achieving the individualized objectives set forth by the CDPs in their work plans.

Annual Reports

Annual reports submitted by the CDPs to the DOH provided an additional source of process evaluation data. Of particular value to the evaluation effort was the Annual Report submitted at the end of year three which required the partnerships to reflect on progress made since the start of the initiative including: 1) changes in partnership composition and structure over time, 2) greatest accomplishments and challenges, 3) opportunities and services offered to young people, 4) scope of youth roles in ACT related opportunities and services, 5) organizational change with partner agencies, 6) community policy change, and 7) initiative success stories. CDPs were asked to provide data at two points in time, six months into the initiative (1/1/01) and at the end of the third year (6/30/03).

CDP Partnership Survey

At the end of the first year of the initiative, a CDP survey was mailed to all identified members of the ACT for Youth partnership. This quantitative survey examined perceptions of the development, functioning and effectiveness of the partnerships.

Reports were submitted separately for upstate and downstate CDPs. This effort was initiated primarily to help inform the work of each community's agencies, and not primarily as a cross site evaluation tool. Samples were defined by CDP active membership as identified by the CDP coordinator, and were not intended to be comparable across the communities. A second study used qualitative interviews of 2 - 4 key informants in each CDP to create an in-depth picture of each partnership's plan, composition, collaborative process, barriers, issues, and accomplishments. The revised CDP survey was mailed again at the start of Year 5 and sent to all members of the partnership to further assess CDP functioning and change over time and also examine the issue of sustainability.

CDP Case Studies

Two sets of case studies were carried out during the end of the fourth year to gather in-depth information on ACT partnership accomplishments, outcomes, and experiences in implementing community youth development strategies across all sites. Five communities had more intensive case studies which involved a three-day site visit, individual and group interviews, and observations. Less intensive case studies were performed at six additional sites. These case studies involved interviews with key informants, such as CDP coordinators and other central people from the Centers of Excellence. A similar interview instrument was used for all the case studies with questions reflective of each of the major ACT for Youth outcome areas.

Youth Focus Groups

A series of six focus groups were conducted in four of the CDPs to gather information on the experiences young people had during the course of their involvement in the initiative. A total of 75 youth participated in these discussions which addressed the fol-

lowing topics: reasons for getting involved, leadership opportunities, skills acquired, relationships with adults, perceived impact, and benefits of participation.

knowledge regarding the Developmental Asset Model. This data was compared with the pre-ACT for Youth Needs Assessment conducted in 1999. ●

Exemplar Study

A qualitative study of exemplar programs – one from each outcome area – was conducted in January 2005. Each site was examined (through input from the Centers of Excellence and key staff at the Department of Health) for significant change and was chosen to represent one outcome area as exemplary practice. The evaluation team constructed an interview instrument used across sites with specialty areas that focused on the specific outcome area under review. The team conducted focus groups and one-on-one interviews at the identified CDPs, and developed in-depth written analysis of the process by which the change occurred, as well as a thorough description of the impacts, successful strategies, and obstacles encountered. The result was a sharp description of the lessons learned, especially assets identified and used, as well as opportunities ACT for Youth leaders and partners confronted.

Upstate Needs Assessments

Upstate Needs Assessments were conducted in 1999 and 2003 to assess the capacity of communities to provide training and technical assistance in the area of youth development, prevention, evaluation, and program development. Telephone interviews were conducted with over 200 youth service programs and coordinating agencies outside of New York City. In addition to documenting the training and technical assistance activities and needs among state-funded agencies and programs serving youth in upstate New York, the 2003 study compared these needs by population served, area demographics, as well as documented youth serving agencies' current

OUTCOME ONE: BUILD AND MAINTAIN THE CDP

Introduction

Developing and maintaining partnerships within each CDP over the course of the initiative was a central objective. To do this, CDPs needed to identify, recruit, and involve key stakeholder agencies and individuals from across their communities. Community partnerships are dynamic and often difficult to maintain over time. Because of this, crafting a mission, establishing core objectives, and maintaining momentum became critical tasks for CDP leaders. They also needed to identify and leverage community resources while simultaneously working around community limitations.

Data collected through multiple sources previously described was used to summarize key trends and themes in building and maintaining the CDP partnerships over the five-year period. The CDP survey was the only data source, apart from case studies, that asked partnership members to assess their satisfaction with the state of the partnership. The data available suggest a generally high level of satisfaction and integration for seven of the eleven sites. It also suggests that many of the CDPs were quite successful in involving partners from diverse sectors.

Although difficult to capture in quantitative terms, the data pointed to several core partnership elements essential for success.

Not all partnerships functioned optimally, but lessons learned from all CDPs revealed essential patterns in what was important in predicting partnership functioning.

Distinctive Partnerships

The remainder of this section contains several references to “distinctive partnerships.” Because each CDP brought to the ACT for Youth initiative different strengths and limitations, it was difficult to compare how well each functioned. Over the course of the initiative, however, it became clear

to those working with all partnerships that several could be qualified as “exemplars” because their cohesiveness, focus, and ability to effectively capitalize on member strengths helped them to excel in some outcome areas relative to the other CDPs. In general, findings can be grouped into four thematic categories –

Strong CDP Partnerships Happened When...

- Agency and CDP coordinator continuity and leadership was stable and respected by the partners.
- Collaboration was based on trust, collective mission, equal effort, and willingness to share resources.
- Key political and community stakeholders were engaged early.
- A wide variety of community sectors were involved.
- Vision, direction, and progress were established and maintained.

vision and mission, leadership, relationships, and membership. Each theme is interrelated and integral to the other themes. These four themes are discussed in greater detail below.

Summary of Key Trends

For most CDPs, building the partnership, articulating a mission and goals, and engaging in coordinated, purposeful activity was the dominant activity for the first couple of years. By the end of the fourth year, partnership levels across all CDPs for

In general, partnerships that started off with healthy levels of functioning tended to remain well integrated. Similarly, partnerships with little early detectible partnership development did not tend to develop later in the initiative.

which data are available stayed roughly level or dropped slightly – largely due to a natural pruning process that occurs once the initial start-up phase of collaboration building is over and active partners turn their attention to the work at hand (Lawson, 2004).

Data from the CDP survey, administered in 2001 and again in 2004, and from the annual reports were examined to identify key trends over time. In general, changes were not extensive. Partnerships that started off with healthy levels of functioning tended to remain quite well integrated. Similarly, partnerships with little early detectible partnership development did not tend to develop later in the initiative*. Key trends are summarized below:

- By the end of the first year, all CDPs reported having built partnerships that ranged from 2 to 39 members (four CDPs reported fewer than 10 members and six CDPs had more than 10). By the end of the third year, all CDPs reported at least 10 members with a range from 10 to 107. It is, however, important to note that entities identified as “members” of the CDP partnership varied dramatically since some CDPs reported only core active members while others identified anyone theoretically linked to the initiative regardless of their level of actual participation.
- The average length of member involvement for all CDPs was 3.4 years and ranged from 1.6 years to the entire length of the initiative.

* The one exception to this is the Capital District, which experienced challenges with their partnership for the first several years. New leadership in the final two years of the initiative strengthened involvement considerably – though leadership for CDP activities was still quite centralized.

- Members of all CDPs for which data were available in 2001 and 2004 expressed generally strong satisfaction with all elements of partnership’s collaboration and functioning.
- The perception that leadership was shared and effective and that CDP work plans were well developed and followed were the only two measures on the 2001 and 2004 CDP survey that showed change over time. Both of these showed a slight drop in agreement.
- In all CDPs for which quantitative data were available, it was clear that members participated in a wide variety of ways throughout the duration of the initiative. The most common forms of participation were: 1) participating in meetings, 2) serving as liaisons between the CDP and their home organization, 3) engaging in networking and referral for the CDPs, and 4) providing staff or material resources.
- CDPs with distinctive partnerships differed slightly from the rest in the extent to which the partners reported involvement in CDP planning, administrative tasks and leadership roles and the extent to which CDP members jointly sought funding.

Vision and Mission

CDP effectiveness in achieving partnership objectives was central in moving from partnership formation to accomplishing other ACT for Youth goals. The

The single most common response when asked what CDPs liked about the partnership was collaboration with other agencies and partners to achieve a common goal and to promote youth development.

single most common response when asked what they liked about the partnership was collaboration with other agencies and partners to achieve a common goal and to promote youth development. Similarly, unclear vision, lack of direction, lack of progress and accomplishments was the most commonly cited challenge. In general, progress in this area was what differentiated the distinctive partnerships from those that struggled.

Identifying and maintaining focus was a key challenge for partnerships. This initiative was unique in that it was focused on the idea of facilitating community change, not service provision. CDPs that were able to identify and reflect on what their vision and mission were and who took steps to assure that their activities reflected this vision were more successful than those partnerships with less clear or consistent vision. CDPs which were able to collectively endorse and use a cohesive community-level youth development framework and language rather than focus solely on developing new programs were generally quite productive in achieving their objectives.

Leadership

Building collaborative partnerships is a time- and energy-consuming process. Because of this, strong and effective leadership was one of the central ingredients of engaging partners and maintaining the partnerships. In distinctive CDPs, partnership members all identified leadership as a critical factor for bringing them to the table, maintaining enthusiasm for the partnership, and keeping the initiative on course.

“The group would not have come together in the first place had it not been for the personalities involved... But then once they get together and start seeing what’s actually happening, how it all works, they keep coming back. Especially at the heads of agencies; they’re their own people, they’ve got their own agencies to run and if they thought it was time better spent doing their own thing, they would have left long ago”

Strong CDP leaders...

- Articulate a vision and set of expectations early in the process.
- Assure that administrative and strategic planning are initiated and maintained.
- Attract and maintain involvement of individuals and institutional entities not traditionally engaged with the youth-serving sector.
- Use or create connections with local power brokers.
- Look for innovative and inclusive ways of garnering input and building broad based consensus

Similarly, lack of leadership emerged as a primary factor in partnerships that struggled. Several types of leadership emerged as important: 1) a strong and effective lead agency, 2) visible and influential community leaders, 3) a strong CDP committee

leadership structure, and 4) a strong initiative coordinator. Once in place, leadership entities needed to articulate a vision and set of expectations early in the process, assure that administrative and strategic planning were initiated and maintained, attract and maintain involvement of individuals and institutional entities not traditionally engaged with the youth-serving sector, use or create

connections with local power brokers, and look for innovative and inclusive ways of garnering input and building consensus.

The Lead Agency

Having a lead agency that was widely regarded, as well as connected and respected in the community, was associated with greater success in partnership development. Effective lead agencies were well established in their communities and had visible, positive track records in building and participating in coalitions. They were also able to identify and recruit high profile and influential community members to add visibility and credibility to the initiative. By pulling together community organizations and political leaders they built trust among group members and fostered consensus building.

Leadership Within the Partnership

Partnerships that identified a steering or leadership committee were more successful in achieving the

“Our Partnership began as a ‘motley crew’ of unfocused, loosely aligned, often warring yet nevertheless well-meaning folks with varying degrees of interest in positive youth development who had never worked together before. When we first convened we did not have the slightest clue how to make positive youth development the contagious movement it needed to be to change the climate and culture for our young people. The ACT for Youth grant made it possible to engage someone knowledgeable in community collaboration and capacity building who was able to be totally focused on building a real partnership dedicated to making positive youth development a reality for our youth.”

desired outcomes. CDPs with distinctive partnerships differed slightly from the rest in the extent to which the partners reported involvement in CDP planning, administrative tasks, and leadership roles, and in the extent to which CDP members jointly sought funding.

Coordinator Capacity and Continuity

In all cases, the success of the ACT for Youth initiative was highly dependent on the presence of a committed project coordinator who was central in providing consistent outreach to schools and community groups, but also directed the partnership’s administrative details and work plans. Partnerships that had repeated turnover faltered in the early stages of collaboration. Characteristics of an effective coordinator included: prior leadership experience and maturity, existing community connections, and the ability to build new community connections. Partnerships that offered adequate compensation and clearly communicated to the coordinator that they were valued were much better at attracting and retaining strong coordinators and, consequently, at accomplishing ACT for Youth objectives.

Success Story

In Erie County, the partnership’s coordinator was universally praised for dedication and wise stewardship of the partnership. In the first two years of the initiative the coordinator guided the partnership through an intensive outreach and education campaign. The coordinator met with county agencies, school districts, community groups, and parents about the potential value-added aspects of participating in the ACT for Youth partnership and the Search Institute Survey process. Throughout interviews with members in Erie County, partners commented on the importance of having a strong, dedicated leader to guide the work of the partnership. Erie County ACT for Youth is an example of partnership guided by leadership that provided a consistent presence for driving the work of the collaboration and maintaining leadership opportunities for youth.

Collaboration meant:

- Trust.
- Willingness to set past conflict or competition aside for a larger collective mission.
- Willingness and ability to resolve turf issues.
- Willingness to share time and other resources.
- Willingness to use their own social capital to facilitate access to needed networks and key stakeholders.

contractual agreements at the outset of the initiative did not work together effectively. Contractual partners did not develop the commitment or motivation to pursue the partnership’s goals; instead of freely sharing information and resources, they limited themselves to delivering the contracted service. Partners needed to perceive value to their individual organizations, as well as the greater community, to feel good about contributing time and resources. In successful partnerships, partners were perceived as equals and each contributed to and received benefits from participating in the partnership. Continuity and consistency of these members within the partnership also contributed to the success of the partnership.

Relationships

Although securing and engaging partners was a critical task, the number of partners in a CDP was not indicative of member satisfaction with partnership functioning or overall partnership performance. When asked in the CDP survey what members liked most about the partnership structure, the second most common response related to networking and linkages with other community providers. When asked what they least liked about the partnership, the most common answer was very similar: relationship issues, lack of communication, and the challenges presented by the collaborative process. Because of the nature of the initiative, accomplishing ACT for Youth objectives was most effective when partners collaborated cohesively.

Among other things, collaboration meant trust, willingness to address and resolve turf issues, willingness to share time and other resources, and willingness to use their own social capital to facilitate access to needed networks and key stakeholders. Partnerships bound together only by

In all CDPs for which quantitative data were available, it was clear that members participated in a wide variety of ways throughout the duration of the initiative. The most common forms of participation were: 1) participating in meetings, 2) serving as liaisons between the CDP and their home organization, 3) engaging in networking and referral for the CDPs, and 4) providing staff or material resources.

“Our primary accomplishment is that we finally exist and are operational as a strong, solid, cross-system, multi-level collaborative, including members from the highest level of government to the most grassroots level groups. Amazingly, we have unified around a common vision and mission, speak a common language, and operate from the same framework, the Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets.”

Although conflict inevitably arose, distinctive partnerships had methods of resolving conflict in place. Talking through issues with the goal of reaching consensus was the most desirable objective, but was not always possible. One very effective partnership handled particularly divisive or persistent problems by asking CDP members most concerned with the issue

to meet with one or two “neutral” CDP members. Once this small group arrived at an agreement, the resolution was brought to the full CDP membership for discussion and was usually adopted.

Monthly roundtable discussions were an important way in which CDPs encouraged the exchange of ideas within their community. These gatherings offered an opportunity for CDP members, community groups, school leaders, and public officials to share best practices and consider proactive, as well as responsive, strategies to pressing challenges within their community. By capitalizing on shared experiences and lessons learned, roundtable participants identified and adapted best practices while simultaneously strengthening their working relationships. Indeed, in an October 2001 survey of Downstate partnerships, 40% of the respondents agreed that “expanded public understanding of their individual organization’s mission and services” was one of the key outcomes of their participation in the ACT for Youth initiative. For many CDPs, increased networking opportunities created a greater understanding of the inner-workings of community human service agencies. Partners commented that they were better equipped to work collaboratively with partnering agencies to create new and innovative programming that did not reinvent the wheel within their communities (ACT for Youth Case Study Report, 2004).

In addition to needing clear and measurable goals and objectives, partners benefited from having early agreed upon sets of expectations. Three of the partnerships used Memorandums of Understanding to concretize partnership roles. In each case, use of such formal mechanisms was identified by partners as extremely helpful in assuring that partnerships objectives were advanced by requiring that partners identify concretely and publicly what they would bring to the table.

Partnerships capable of building on existing relationships, coalitions, structures, and organizations launched their partnership with more ease and encountered greater community readiness to support CDP goals. In these cases, the turf issues appeared less often as partners established trust based on their earlier collaborative work.

Opportunities to network, share best practices, and work collaboratively were some of the most widely cited results of the ACT for Youth Initiative. In addition, some partners, inspired by their work within the CDP, created permanent opportunities within their organizations to network, collaborate on future projects, and share best practices in program delivery. The results were sustainable systems that ensure long-term cross referral and networking opportunities among partnership agencies. According to the October 2002 CDP Collaboration Survey, 26% of CDPs reported that they received client referrals stemming from their participation in the ACT for Youth initiative.

Membership

Although key stakeholders varied from site to site, all tended to be individuals with broad social networks and influential positions in the community. It was widely agreed, for example, that engaging and retaining the support of key political stakeholders during the initiative was a crucial accomplishment. It was also, important, however, to assure that key stakeholders used their leverage to make the ACT for

One of the core findings related to membership was that although securing and engaging partners was a critical task, the number of partners in a CDP was not indicative of member satisfaction with partnership functioning or overall partnership performance.

Including new partners...

- Provides additional expertise and a new focus.
- Increases youth development programming in the community.
- Expands individual partners' networking and service provision capability which can lead to resource exchange.

Youth initiative very visible. In distinctive CDPs, this leverage was cited as critical for advancing the partnership's community level youth development goals. Community political figures such as the town supervisor, county legislators, or County Executive were particularly valuable allies in spearheading community and organizational level policy changes regarding youth.

Cross Sector Commitment and Involvement

One of the main goals of the initiative was to form a partnership representing diverse sectors of the community with the aim of widening the net of individuals concerned with the health and well being of young

people. Although there were considerable variations in form, structure, and sector diversity across the CDPs, it was clear that all had worked at forming and maintaining diverse partnerships and most CDPs were successful in recruiting participation from individuals and institutional representatives with little history of youth-service involvement.

It is significant that the most frequently identified strength of the partnership after the first year was its "broad based representation." The partnerships described themselves as diverse, broad in membership, endorsed by key community leaders, and representative of a variety of people and agencies. Although many of the partnerships built on an existing core group or known partners, many noted that bringing in new partners added to the cache of talent and capacity of the CDP overall.

Although human service partners continued to be a dominant group, most CDPs were successful in engaging a wide variety of community sectors, including health service providers, mental health providers, local government agencies, education, business, faith-based organizations, criminal justice, media, adult community members, youth community members, and volunteer or recreational organizations.

Success Story

The Greene County ACT for Youth CDP was built around four interrelated work committees. The Executive Steering Committee, which was the lead decision-making body, included members from the Department of Social Services, Sheriff's Department, Public Health/Family Planning, and local community college. The remaining three committees included the Operations Committee, the Quality Assurance Committee, and the Resource Task Force. This structure enabled the partnership to remain strong even though key actors retired or moved on. In addition, the CDP depended on the active engagement of a wide range of diverse member agencies. At most partnership meetings, one could find county agency leaders, program coordinators, police officers, school administrators, clergy, and Elk Lodge members sitting around a table discussing their experiences with the partnership, sharing success stories, and strategizing for the future. This CDP's effectiveness was realized in its genuine commitment to community-wide partnership, coupled with a commitment to increasing services, opportunities, and supports for youth

TABLE 1.1 PERCENTAGE OF CDP MEMBERS THAT REPORTED SEEKING JOINT FUNDING WITH OTHER PARTNERS

Responding CDPs	Sought Joint Funding (Percent Responding “Yes”)
A	86%
B	80%
C	67%
D	50%
E	40%
F	27%
G	22%
Total respondents = 109 Percentage across responding CDPs =41%	

Collaboration & Individual Program Funding

For some CDPs, the construction of a new countywide collaboration impacted the number of overall financial resources and therefore potential services, supports, and opportunities available to individual agencies and organizations. During interviews, members from five CDPs reported that increasingly they were beginning to apply for program funding, together with other CDP members. Table 1.1 confirms this trend, with one CDP reporting that 86 percent of their CDP membership had sought joint funding with other partners.

Partnerships also provided resources and technical assistance to organizations and coalitions outside of their CDP. Members of one ACT for Youth CDP used resource-mapping technology to provide a coalition of area after-school providers with strategies and resources for grant writing. The result of this collaboration between partnerships was an increase in the number of agencies receiving Community Oriented Policing Services funding from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. Consequently, the number of after-school programs, as well as after-

school hours of service, have increased.

However, collaboration among CDP members and other organizations was not solely limited to funding proposals. Many worked together on joint projects or activities, sharing staff/financial resources in order to increase the number of programs in the area that were employing a strengths-based and youth development perspective. Sixty percent of respondents to a CDP survey said they were engaged in 1-5 joint projects that involved other partners/organizations, which came together as a result of the ACT for Youth initiative.

Youth as Partners

Youth involvement at the partnership level emerged as one of the biggest challenges for most ACT for Youth sites. A key issue was that many adults remained focused on program involvement and young people were seen as active program participants, but not as partnership members. Thinking about youth involvement evolved over time. Initial goals to recruit young people directly to boards gave way to efforts to engage young people in decision-making roles on different levels (see outcome 3). Only two partnerships recorded young people as

partnership members. Both partnerships utilized a grassroots organizing approach that highlighted youth adult partnerships and focused less on community representation.

Schools and Businesses

Schools and businesses were also consistently identified as key community power brokers, but were often very difficult to engage. This was particularly challenging for sites which identified school participation as a central objective. Schools were often perceived as separate entities governed by different rules and standards. Only one community experienced success in enlisting the school board and administrative bodies in a large scale endorsement of youth development principles and practices. Their success required years of diligent persistence and significant navigation of political hurdles and is only now coming to fruition.

The business community was also quite difficult to engage. Few partnerships had businesses or a representative of the local merchant's block association involved. In one site, a local business leader was critical in helping youth locate financial support and publicize upcoming activities. Members were unsure about the best strategy for engaging this constituency, with one of the sites saying that they had given up all together.

Lessons Learned

The ACT for Youth experience provided many lessons in partnership formation and maintenance. Many of these lessons learned confirm previous research findings on collaboration and community partnerships (e.g., Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001). Listed below are several of the most salient lessons learned from Outcome One.

1. ***Define, refine, and continue to revisit the partnership's vision.*** Shared vision of the project was a major benefit of

participation in the partnership. How a community and partnership defined youth development and how it was infused within the community was unique to each CDP, but it was essential that there be a consistent vision that members agreed upon, endorsed, and conveyed to the larger community. This vision was the glue that held the partnership together. Partnerships should use their vision to develop a strategic plan, which in turn, can help the group evaluate and reflect on potential actions and directions.

2. ***Support and strengthen leadership of the partnership.*** Strong, effective leadership was clearly necessary at the lead agency, from the partnership coordinator, and within the partnership. Findings indicate that leadership should be present at the outset of a partnership and should be supported and developed throughout the course of a partnership.
 - Well-positioned, well-respected, experienced lead agency. When the lead agency lacked the credibility, intrinsic motivation, and/or leadership skills to lead the initiative, the initiative faltered. Successful partnerships benefited from lead agencies with a demonstrated track record of successful strategic planning, ability to leverage resources, organizational development, and partnership development. In addition, exemplary lead agencies clearly understood youth development as a philosophy and appreciated its intrinsic value.
 - Consistent, effective, experienced coordinator. Stable, enthusiastic and infectious leaders were difficult to come by, but were those best suited for the role. Leaders were most effective when they possessed a clear vision of youth development, were able to effectively convey that vision, had a history

of mutually satisfying relationships with youth, relied on strong existing networks in the community, and possessed strong group and meeting facilitation skills, as well as creativity. Strong coordinators also benefited from having previous experience working with coalitions and from working within a strong lead agency.

3. **Promote broad visibility of the ACT for Youth initiative.** Even the best leadership was not enough to accomplish the broad reach CDPs needed to induce wide scale community change. The ACT for Youth philosophy should be highly visible and broadly endorsed by core community leaders.
4. **Build on existing collaborations.** Results showed that it was important to start with existing collaborations or networks, adapt and integrate the ACT for Youth principles with the group's mission and vision, and develop a sense of group ownership before work starts in earnest; then support each member in reaching out to others.
5. **Strengthen collaborative strategies.** Once a partnership has formed, group expectations, structures, and processes should be developed. Clearly defining and articulating roles, responsibilities, and expectations from the start was instrumental to success. Effective communication was critical. Conflict needed to be expected, acknowledged, and dealt with swiftly and effectively. Memorandums of understanding were helpful. Subcommittees within the partnership were also beneficial.
6. **Assure cross sector commitment and involvement.** Part of building a capable, collaborative, and functional partnership depended on garnering cross-sector involvement. Partnerships learned that it takes new and different ways to connect with and

involve non-traditional partners. In particular, parents, faith communities, businesses, and informal community groups lacked representation in ACT for Youth sites. More technical assistance and training was needed in these areas.

7. **Engage school, political, faith, and business sectors early on in partnership formation.** Although critical for instituting community level change, many communities encountered difficulties in engaging partners from these sectors. Provide training and technical assistance for engaging these sectors early in the initiative. ●

EXEMPLAR: Cattaraugus County ACT for Youth

The Cattaraugus County ACT for Youth initiative used its existing solid foundation of networks and partnerships to jumpstart their work. Cattaraugus County, a large, rural county, had a history of collaboration between human service providers of both private non-for-profit and public agencies. Under the leadership of the county executive, this collaboration began to focus on the well being of young people and initiated a strategic planning process using the Search Institute's asset model as a guiding framework. The ACT for Youth initiative advanced the partnership in several ways. It strengthened ties to the educational sector. Replicating the model of a successful school-based family resource center, the initiative established three additional family resource centers in other school districts, thus providing easier access to services for rural communities and creating successful engagement opportunities for young people. Another strategy that solidified and expanded the partnership was the annual provision of mini-grants to providers and community groups for youth development projects. The Cattaraugus Community Development Partnership benefited greatly from strong leadership, a shared vision and clearly articulated goals. Very visible, well-respected community stakeholders, such as the County Executive, Commissioner of Social Services and the Director of the County Youth Bureau championed the initiative from the beginning. The ACT for Youth Coordinator provided competent program and grant management leadership. The Community Development Partnership evolved into a very effective large network of public and private community organizations which utilized a small leadership team and general member network meeting structure. Monthly network meetings served as a forum to share information and showcase projects and programs. In addition, the network provided learning experiences through on-going training and asset building materials and tools. The result: a wide range of new activities and opportunities for young people in Cattaraugus County. ● ●

OUTCOME TWO: INCREASED SERVICES, OPPORTUNITIES & SUPPORTS

Introduction

Increased services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) for young people is the second of five outcomes around which the ACT for Youth initiative was structured. The terms can be described in the following way:

- **Services** are actions done for young people that foster well being through the safe exploration of new skills and knowledge.
- **Opportunities** are actions done by young people in their family, at school, and in the community to explore and experience new roles, skills, and responsibilities.

Key Findings

- Additional innovative youth development-oriented programs were developed in ACT for Youth communities.
- CDPs used direct and indirect approaches to this outcome, which produced different results.

Lessons Learned: Services, Opportunities and Supports

- Clear definitions of terms and concepts needed.
- Clear and measurable outcomes needed.
- Tailor services, opportunities, and supports to specific local contexts.
- Youth-adults partnerships advance efforts.
- Community education is critical.
- Engage and educate non-traditional community sectors.

- **Supports** are activities done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and resources that are essential in creating a positive climate for development.

In order to make progress in this outcome area, CDPs needed to internalize an understanding of the concepts and use them as a guide in making decisions regarding program development.

Additionally, CDPs were expected to couple their efforts on this outcome with their work on outcome three, increase youth engagement. As a result, this outcome tended to facilitate other outcomes of the ACT for Youth initiative. This outcome appeared to be the most immediately familiar to CDPs at the start of the initiative and early efforts were concentrated here

by many ACT for Youth communities. The work that fell under this outcome helped:

- Bring partners to the table by establishing common interests (outcome one);
- Lay the foundation for increased youth engagement (outcome three);
- Help organizations evaluate their practices and promote changes to support a youth development approach to working with youth (outcome four);
- Reveal that achievement in this area was sometimes associated with precursors to community policy change (outcome five).

The broad scope of outcome two brought both significant achievements and significant challenges. CDPs created a wide array of new and enhanced programs in their efforts to increase services, opportunities, and supports. Additionally, the approaches by which CDPs focused their work around this outcome fell into one of two main

“The best thing ACT for Youth has done is allow us to get together kids that would not normally know each other. It has really helped breakdown the stereotypes. It just gives us a better place to start from.”

categories: direct and indirect. A review of annual and quarterly reports, coupled with data gleaned from the case studies, and an exemplar study conducted in several ACT for Youth sites, yielded the detailed results that follow.

New and Enhanced Programs

As previously noted, this outcome was more immediately familiar for many CDPs and work on it continued steadily over the course of the initiative. The CDPs started the initiative with a strong sense of existing programming in their community and recruited partners largely based on this knowledge. A common starting point for the newly convened collaborations was to generate ideas regarding gaps in current youth programming and services. Numerous CDPs then strategized ways in which ACT for Youth could address those gaps and eliminate duplications. These early efforts led to noteworthy program creation (discussed later in this section).

“Our wide-scale mini-grant program has allocated almost \$65,000 and 300 mini-grants, mostly to area schools and community organizations looking to enhance their existing activities offerings to youth.”

A key element that is unique to ACT for Youth, and proved to be a useful and exciting aid to the work of CDPs, was that ACT for Youth funds were not restricted to specific high-risk segments of the youth population. This gave CDPs the freedom to bring diverse groups of young people together, avoiding the stigma that often accompanies participation in programs targeted to high-risk youth.

Over the course of the initiative, CDPs identified a range of services including job readiness training, community service, and youth forums. Supports included mentoring, training, and supervision provided to young people participating in these opportunities. The core of youth engagement, opportunities will be described in the next section.

Between year one and three of the initiative utilization of CDP member-provided services doubled. Utilization was calculated by multiplying the reported average number of participants in a given service (e.g., a public speaking training course) by the number of sessions in a program cycle. If a training course had an average of five participants per session, and lasted six sessions, the average utilization for the program cycle would be 30 sessions of activity.

Over time, services and opportunities provided by CDP partners appeared to engage larger numbers of young people, and retain them in longer cycles of participation (see Table 2.1). This accords with the positive youth development principle of long-term engagement detailed in the introduction to this report.

TABLE 2.1 NUMBER AND UTILIZATION OF SERVICES

	January 2001	June 2003
Average number of services	20	19
Average utilization per program cycle	12,022	24,158

TABLE 2.2 AVERAGE NUMBER OF CDP SUPPORTS, BY TYPE

	January 2001	June 2003
Training	9	11
Formal mentoring	3	5
Informal mentoring	5	6
Peer-led training	6	8
Adult supervision	16	13
Other	2	1

Once the initiative was underway, the number of supports provided for youth remained roughly constant. The most commonly provided supports for youth were training and adult supervision. Other types of supports, including mentoring and peer-led training, increased over time. In some cases, multiple supports were provided to youth. Table 2.2 shows the average number of supports each CDP provided to young people participating in its opportunities and services.

Success Story

Kan Cobra, one of the Brooklyn CDP partner agencies that offered martial arts training, opened savings accounts for all youth participants. The program director instituted this policy to help kids think about the way they spend their money and to stress the importance of saving and investment. One partner commented, "It's so important for these kids to begin to focus on their future. Often times you'll hear them say that they don't think they are going to be around in 10 years." Each month, the program director deposits 10 percent of the revenue she receives from each participant's fees into his or her savings account. The youth receive all the account information and learn to manage their own finances through the support of the adult leaders. In the past, the participants used the money to attend tournaments and to go on educational field trips.

TABLE 2.3 CDP PROGRAMS AT THE END OF YEAR THREE

June 2003

Program Type	Number of Programs	Number of Youth
Civic Participation	31	469
Sports and Recreation	27	1,649
Skill Development	33	1,329
Health and Education	39	2,818
Leadership	11	405
Planning and Evaluation	9	338
Arts and Culture	20	270
Service Learning	4	230
Total	174	7,508

In the third year of the initiative, CDPs reported on the levels and types of ACT for Youth programming in their community. Types ranged from workshops to large group events to one-on-one mentoring relationships. Most programming was concentrated in the Health and Education category. This was to be expected, given that most of the CDP partners were from the youth services sector. There was notable program activity in Skill Development and Civic Participation. These programs typically engaged youth on a higher level by structuring opportunities for youth to interact with others in their communities, exposing youth to new ideas and perspectives, and providing tools that youth could continue to develop beyond the program. Program categories, number of programs, and number of youth involved are shown in Table 2.3.

In order to capture program development momentum (or lack thereof), CDPs were asked to report on new programs developed during the fourth year of the initiative. When compared to the baseline shown in Table 2.3, the results shown in

Table 2.4 clearly indicate that CDPs remained highly active in this outcome area.

In the fourth year of the initiative:

- **Six CDPs reported new civic participation programs that involved youth in new ways within the community.**

These types of programs are valuable in that they 1) expose youth to the ways in which community and regional systems work, 2) engage youth in creating environments in which young people are valued, and 3) help youth find connection beyond the school and family as they move into adulthood. Over 1,200 young people in New York State were exposed to new civic participation programs as a result of ACT for Youth efforts. Diverse programs included a newsletter that profiled the contributions of youth in the community, youth-adult network-

Eighty-seven new programs were created in the fourth year of the ACT for Youth initiative.

TABLE 2.4 NEW PROGRAMS DEVELOPED IN YEAR FOUR
July 2003-June 2004

Program Type	Number of New Programs	Number of Involved Youth*
Civic Participation	16	1,271
Sports and Recreation	15	1,602
Skill Development	13	2,000
Health and Education	12	1,190
Leadership	12	767
Planning and Evaluation	9	404
Arts and Culture	6	129
Service Learning	4	162
Total	87	6,623

*This number reflects the number reported by the CDP for individual activities now grouped into these categories. Therefore, a single youth could be included in multiple categories.

ing opportunities, a voter registration project, and a food drive.

- **Three CDPs reported new programming in the area of sports and recreation.** The majority of these programs were developed in rural areas, where social isolation and a lack of engaging and healthy activities for young people had been identified as significant problems. New recreation programming helped to address these issues. Although these activities were concentrated in only three ACT for Youth communities, it is noteworthy that they impacted nearly 1,300 youth. Programs included cardboard sled races, ecology camp, dances, and ropes courses.
- **Seven CDPs reported new programming that focused on the development of specific skills.** While the overwhelming majority of new programs provided the chance for skill development, the programs in this category made skill development the focal point and desired outcome. In a single year, these programs helped 2,000 young

people develop their capacity to apply knowledge and to succeed in future endeavors. The wide-ranging topics covered included: technology, philanthropy, conflict resolution, peer leadership, culinary arts, and public speaking.

- **Six CDPs reported new programming that centered on health and education.** Encouraging healthy choices for young people, the programs included mentoring, academic support, developing healthy habits, violence prevention, and STD/HIV prevention.
- **Seven CDPs reported new programming that focused on youth leadership.** These programs represent one of the cornerstones of youth development. Rather than providing leadership training alone, these programs gave young people actual leadership roles and opportunities within youth court and youth councils, as teen ambassadors, trainers and facilitators, within youth-adult partnerships, and within youth-led projects.
- **Five CDPs reported new programming**

in the areas of planning and evaluation. These programs concentrated on opportunities for young people to receive, collect, and report on information that was important to their community, their future, and themselves. Activities allowed young people to see the impact of their contributions and the importance of their decisions. Among others, programs included community surveys, strength-based assessments, and career exploration.

- **Three CDPs reported new programming on arts and culture.** These programs allowed youth to test out new roles and explore cultural differences. Programs included arts and music classes, a talent show, and youth-adult role reversal.
- **Four CDPs reported new service-learning programming as an avenue to build skills and connect to the greater community.** The activities ranged from community beautification to participation in National Youth Service Day.

These findings highlight that the ACT for Youth core youth development concepts were embedded in the way communities approached their work with young people and remained a high priority for CDPs throughout the course of the initiative.

Direct and Indirect Approaches

To achieve success, two types of approaches were used: direct and indirect. Because they led to different results, it is worth examining these different paths and strategies. Additionally, the evidence presented here leads to key questions about the sustainability of CDPs under the ACT for Youth initiative.

The Direct Approach

The strategies and activities of CDPs that are described as direct include 1) creation

of new programs for and by youth, 2) enhancement of existing programs that were perceived as effective, and 3) outreach to more diverse youth audiences. These strategies sought to impact the experience of young people in the community directly. It was anticipated that success at the ground-level, through a direct approach, would filter up into organizations and impact community attitudes that would support the broader youth development goals of ACT for Youth. Some examples of CDPs using direct approaches to this outcome include:

1. **New Programs.** As previously discussed, all eleven CDPs created new programs for and by youth. For example, one CDP created youth businesses that encouraged young

Hints for Offering Opportunities to Participate and Contribute

- Provide opportunities to explore career interests and employment or higher education options.
- Arrange opportunities for young people to educate their parents, community or local and state officials about issues of concern.
- Create a youth advisory board that gives young people decision-making power.
- Have young people either present at a meeting of the Board of Directors or have a young person become a member.
- Have discussions within the program about issues of diversity when they come up.

people to take on the leadership and direction of small-scale enterprises. This encouraged the young people to advertise their products and services in the community in order to help their businesses thrive. In turn, this allowed others in the community to see the productive contributions and ambitions of young people.

2. **Enhancement of Existing Programs.** Eight of the eleven CDPs supported programming that existed prior to ACT for Youth through publicity, collaboration, recruitment, and/or financial resources. The programs selected for CDP support were largely seen as a platform that already promoted youth development. CDP support benefited youth in the community and the overall success of the CDP. For example, one CDP used their leverage as a collaboration to support lifeguard-training opportunities for youth offered through the American Red Cross. The opportunity existed prior to ACT for Youth, but the CDP assisted with recruitment because they understood how the training supported youth development goals. This experience provided youth with tangible skills that some youth were able to transfer into summer employment opportunities. It also served to bring attention to the youth activities of the American Red Cross.
3. **Outreach to More Diverse Youth Audiences.** Ten CDPs reported that the ACT for Youth initiative helped them engage more diverse youth audiences within their communities. In particular, CDPs were able to bring diverse groups of young people together who, prior to ACT for Youth, had little opportunity to interact. CDPs were able to use ACT for Youth as a way to break down stereotypes and cliques. For example, one CDP recruited a new

group of youth from the programs of the individual partner agencies to participate in a college exposure program. The young people attended workshops about the college selection and application process, learned about considerations in selecting a college, and identified three colleges they wanted to visit as a group. Partner agencies sponsored the college tour together. Notably, this program was carried out in an urban area where most young people attend school outside their neighborhood and where there are deeply rooted rivalries among the neighborhoods. The experience served as a foundation for connecting these young people locally and in new settings, and enabled barriers to be confronted with some success. At the completion of the college program, many youth remained involved and started new cross-agency projects.

The Indirect Approach

CDP strategies and activities that were described as indirect were those that sought to impact 1) service delivery and 2) program infrastructure on a broader scale. Rather than address services, opportunities, and supports directly through programming, indirect efforts focused on information and education. By educating the youth service providers and the community at large about positive youth development, the ACT for Youth partnerships aimed to improve existing youth programming and create non-traditional services and supports for young people. Eventually, this led to improved youth outcomes. Some examples of indirect approaches within this outcome area are:

1. **Service Delivery.** All eleven CDPs trained, disseminated information, and/or influenced community members outside the CDP to make programming shifts that reflect the core youth development principles of

services, opportunities, and supports. This was accomplished in a variety of ways – through newsletters, guest speakers, conferences, and trainings. For example, one CDP effort centered on a community education model. They trained cadres of facilitators in the core youth development concepts and sent them out into the community to train youth service providers. They involved youth in this process and reached a broad cross-section of their community far beyond the individual organizations represented in their CDP. The goal of this strategy was to influence overall service delivery, thus broadly increasing services, opportunities, and supports available to young people.

2. **Program Infrastructure.** Eight of eleven CDPs employed strategies that involved strengthening and/or creating new youth programming infrastructure. This approach sought to impact the environments where youth programming took place, and increase the flow of information across agencies. Activities in this area ranged from universal community intake forms to creating youth-led councils for the delivery of services, opportunities, and supports community-wide. For example, one CDP created resource centers in several school districts. This was done in order to bring the extensive web of youth services into a setting where young people already

spent a great deal of time, making it easier for them to take advantage of services, opportunities, and supports. Also, by having a new community-based program site that served as a conduit of information and access, the CDP could gain the influence needed to spread the core youth development principles of services, opportunities, and supports (see also outcome four).

While all CDPs used a mixture of direct and indirect approaches, the majority of CDPs concentrated their efforts on direct approaches that had a more immediate impact on the lives of youth in their communities. Those efforts tended to help CDPs gain momentum and attract positive attention early on, which helped as they branched out and diversified their strategies. The CDPs that leaned toward more indirect approaches appeared to start off slowly because their strategies took longer to build and demonstrate results. However, by the fourth year of the initiative, those CDPs that had put their efforts toward the indirect goals of impacting service delivery and infrastructure showed marked stability and influence across their communities.

The direct and indirect approaches leave different legacies in the CDP communities, and important questions to consider in terms of sustainability. It remains to be seen what changes in programming inspired by ACT for Youth will outlive this first cycle of the initiative. Several CDPs absorbed programs created under ACT for

Success Story

In the Bronx CDP, a needs assessment performed by youth in the community as part of ACT resulted in the development of a new Technology Center, A Better Bronx for Youth, located at the lead agency. The assessment indicated a lack of access to, and training in, current technology. As a result, the CDP dedicated a part of their site to the Technology Center which is now equipped with computers loaded with numerous software packages. The Center also provides self-guided instruction on use of the computers, as well as a wide variety of character development issues, including conflict resolution, communication skills, etc. The Center is available to youth groups and individuals. One of the most significant contributions of the Center is that youth in the community see the impact of their efforts and ideas realized.

Youth into individual CDP organizations in order to make sure that these youth services continue. CDPs that concentrated on the more broad-based indirect approaches expressed optimism about long-term change in the organizations their efforts impacted.

Lessons Learned

The diverse efforts of CDPs to increase services, opportunities, and supports for youth in their communities yielded some important lessons that can be instructive for future youth development initiatives.

1. ***Terms like services, opportunities, and supports that have other commonly held connotations need to be taught, reinforced, and adopted early.*** Virtually every CDP community operationalized these terms in different ways. For the purposes of measurement and uniformity, early efforts to build a collective working definition is essential. Additionally, establishing clarity and common ground can help build a community among CDPs where best practices and strategies for success can be shared.
2. ***Strong youth-adult partnerships are an essential mechanism for opportunities and supports.*** Programs and services are more innovative, authentic, and engaging when they are planned collaboratively with youth rather than by adults alone.
3. ***Youth development programming must be tailored to specific local contexts.*** ACT for Youth communities reflect New York State's urban, rural, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity. Having a diverse and representative community partnership able to meet the specific local needs of youth was essential.

4. ***Community education is a critical ingredient of youth development efforts.*** This is true of all five outcome areas, but emerged strongly in review of this outcome area. Communities need to take real ownership in bringing positive youth development messages to the forefront of their interactions with young people and the community at large.
5. ***It is important to engage non-traditional community sectors.*** Engaging non-traditional sectors such as schools, law enforcement, and business was critical to creating community-wide environments suited to the developmental needs of youth. To exclude these groups is to exclude sectors of society important to youth development. ●

EXEMPLAR: Jefferson County Act for Youth

Jefferson County ACT for Youth formed several community councils, based on school districts, to reach out to different regions of this large, rural county. Council members included youth and adults who lived within the geographic area of the school district. The Belleville-Henderson school district includes two small villages, one central school complex and many acres of farm land. The community council began their work with a community assessment, investigating the questions:

1. How supportive is the community toward our young people?
2. What kind of activities and opportunities are available for our youth?

They found that young people did not have much to do during after school hours. The school building was closed and there were no other youth-centered agencies in either village. Most youth activities were located in Watertown, the largest city in the county. Lack of public transportation made those opportunities inaccessible to most young people in Belleville-Henderson.

The council decided to create youth opportunities and organized several community service projects from painting playground structures to community gardening and beautification projects. In conjunction with other community councils, they created and facilitated outdoor education and leadership opportunities. Most importantly, they discussed the possibilities of creating a youth center and mapped both communities for potential sites. An abandoned school building offered space and the council initiated a fund raising campaign involving community members of all ages. The council raised several thousand dollars for building improvements and engaged in negotiations with local officials to develop the organizational structure, including adult supervision for the center. After three years of effort, the new youth center opened its doors. Now, the center serves as the hub of youth activities for the Belleville-Henderson community. ● ●

OUTCOME THREE: INCREASED YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Youth engagement is a fundamental principle of the positive youth development movement. Numerous terms are used, often interchangeably, by researchers and practitioners to describe this concept, including “youth voice,” “youth participation,” “youth involvement,” and “youth empowerment” All share the common belief that youth should be viewed as resources and assets to be nurtured, not problems to be fixed, and that youth should be active agents in their own developmental process.

The “O” in the “SOS” trilogy of Services, Opportunities, and Supports points to youth engagement. For ACT for Youth, opportunities refer to actions taken by young people, emphasizing the notion that youth are active players, rather than passive recipients of information or services. Youth engagement represents the extent to which youth are provided meaningful and real opportunities to practice and expand on what they know and learn, either through work, service, or advanced learning. Although youth ideally encounter a diverse array of opportunities, those that are sustained and encourage youth to exercise meaningful decision-making roles ultimately foster the greatest number of personal competencies, and have the greatest impact on adults, organizations, and communities (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Lorens, 2001).

Increasing youth engagement has been a central goal of the ACT for Youth initiative. All the CDPs devoted considerable energy and attention to creating meaningful and more advanced opportunities for young people to contribute to their communities. However, as evidenced in the quarterly reports, CDP surveys, and through interac-

Youth Engagement Happens When...

- The organization makes a commitment to youth participation and creates meaningful opportunities and supportive structures
- Activities and services provided for youth are universally accessible.
- Adults work around the logistics, location, environment and time challenges youth engagement entails.
- Adult staff are genuinely excited about working with youth.
- Youth and adults are prepared to work together.
- Youth are allowed to lead and direct; adults provide guidance and support.
- Appropriate structures are in place for recruiting, preparing, and retaining youth.

tions with the Centers of Excellence staff, this outcome posed a number of challenges for the partnerships, especially in the early stages of the initiative. Many communities struggled not only to create new roles for young people that departed from their previous practice of youth service and program delivery, but also to sustain that involvement over time. Barriers such as transportation, coordinating adult and youth schedules, and overall “readiness” (for youth, adults and organizations) were but a few of the challenges faced. The Centers of Excellence worked closely with the CDPs to help them engage young people in the process of planning, developing, and implementing opportunities in their

communities. They provided information on how to strengthen youth voice efforts through ongoing training and technical assistance.

The multiple data sources analyzed demonstrate that the CDPs made tremendous progress toward increasing youth engagement over the course of the initiative. CDPs created more opportunities for youth, especially experiences that enabled young people to function in a leadership capacity and to contribute to their communities in new ways. The results presented below are organized according to the following four themes:

- Youth involvement in meaningful roles
- Meaningful opportunities for young people
- Benefits of youth engagement
- Effective strategies and lessons learned

Youth Involvement in Meaningful Roles

One of the most striking findings in this outcome area was the sheer increase in the number of young people involved in meaningful roles within their communities over the course of the initiative. Table 3.1 lists the average number of youth involved

in seven different types of roles at two different points in time: 1) as of January 2001 (six months into the initiative), and 2) as of August 2004 (at the beginning of the fifth year). Each role was defined as a “meaningful opportunity” in that it required youth to hold significant responsibility or serve in a leadership capacity. It is possible that some of the opportunities listed involved youth in

multiple roles, reflecting multiple types of experience. The data, drawn from the ACT for Youth annual

reports, illustrate that the overall number of opportunities rose significantly over the course of the initiative in every role category. Additional highlights include:

- In each case, the largest numbers of youth were involved in planning, developing, and implementing project activities and programs. This increased from an average of 10 per CDP in the first year

One of the most striking findings in this outcome area is the sheer increase in the numbers of young people involved in meaningful roles within their communities over the course of the initiative.

TABLE 3.1 AVERAGE NUMBER OF YOUTH INVOLVED IN MEANINGFUL ROLES ACROSS ALL ACT FOR YOUTH CDPs

Role	January 2001	August 2004
Governance	3	46
Project Planning/Development	10	90
Evaluation/Assessment	3	21
Communications/PR	7	66
Education	9	35
Service	7	63
Policy/Advocacy	1	25

of ACT for Youth to an average of 90 per CDP by the start of the fifth year across all the sites.

- Significant numbers of youth were also involved in service, such as volunteerism and service learning. This increased from an average of seven per CDP in the first year to an average of 63 per CDP by the fifth year.
- Youth were also increasingly involved in communication/public relations roles - delivering messages to the community and spreading the word about programs, issues and activities. Activities included developing posters, magazines, web pages, and videos. This number rose from an average of seven per CDP in the first year to an average of 66 per CDP by the fifth year. Halfway through the fifth year, one CDP developed, produced, and aired a public service announcement with a local television station challenging adult stereotypes and assumptions regarding youth.

It is important to point out that while all CDPs reported increased numbers of youth in meaningful roles, this varied considerably across partnerships. Examples of how communities actually engaged young people in these roles are described below. First, perceptions of youth involvement by partnership members are illustrated to provide a broader perspective on how youth were viewed and treated within their respective communities.

Perceptions of Youth Involvement

In both CDP surveys that were conducted (2001 and 2004), perceptions of youth involvement remained steady over time:

- The majority of members

(close to 80%) believed that they incorporated the perspectives and priorities of young people in their communities.

- Approximately 50% felt that youth were involved in community decision making and planning.

Findings from the 2004 CDP survey indicate that on average across the sites:

- 41% felt that community leaders invited youth to present, advise, or serve on committees.
- 67% believed that young people were viewed as resources and actively engaged in planning, implementing, and evaluating programming.
- 31% believed that young people participated as active, voting members on various community boards.

The CDPs clearly made tremendous strides in creating meaningful roles for young people. The average number of youth in each of the seven reported roles rose dramatically over a 3.5 year period. Both CDP surveys suggest that the majority of adults in the community believed that they take youth perspectives into the planning process and view youth as resources, but fewer believed that youth are actively included in governance, i.e., in making decisions that affect organizations and communities. The next section further examines adult perceptions

“Prior to the ACT for Youth program in Brooklyn, youth in the community had few opportunities to engage in service activities, to acquire leadership skills, or to participate in community-based programs dedicated to serving youth. Programs that were present were eligible only for youth in specific risk categories. ACT for Youth was successful in engaging large numbers of youth in a way that had never been done before. Youth were incorporated into all levels of the program and were a part of the overall effort to provide a comprehensive set of inclusive and responsive programs and services.”

TABLE 3.2 2003 UPSTATE NEEDS ASSESSMENT ADOLESCENT PARTICIPATION IN AGENCY ACTIVITIES

Roles	CDP Community %	Non-CDP Community %
Governance/Decision Making	60	57
Program Development and Planning	81	72
Evaluation/Research	52	48
Communication/Public Relations	82**	56**
Providing education	76*	54*
Service	81	76
Advocacy	61**	45**
Other	13	14

*statistically significant at p < .05 level
 ** statistically significant at p < .01 level

of adolescent participation in meaningful roles by comparing CDP vs. non-CDP communities.

Youth Engagement in CDP Versus Non-CDP Communities

The 2003 Upstate Needs Assessment of Youth Development Capacity was conducted to document training and technical assistance activities and needs among approximately 200 state-funded agencies and programs serving youth in upstate New York. This study (which excluded New York City and Long Island) documented the current youth development knowledge level of youth serving agencies (in both CDP and non-CDP communities) and the extent to which they incorporated key youth development principles within their organizational structures. As illustrated in Table 3.2, the results indicate that respondents from CDP communities more often noted that youth were involved in agency activities versus those from non-CDP communities. Across each role category, CDP communities reported a higher percentage of roles in which adolescents participated.

CDP communities were significantly more likely to report that youth were involved in communication/public relations (82% vs. 56%) providing education (76% vs. 54%), and advocacy (61% vs. 45%).

Other findings from the statewide survey suggest that:

- ACT for Youth affected the community’s interaction with youth by increasing youth involvement, promoting a collaborative atmosphere, and improving the general opinion about youth. For example, respondents mentioned that the community “sees youth as assets rather than liabilities” and “now views youth as positive.”
- ACT for Youth affected youth involvement. Forty-one percent of respondents thought that ACT for Youth increased youth involvement within the agency, and 72% thought ACT initiatives increased youth involvement within the community. Participants stated that ACT for Youth increased youth involvement in their programs by cultivating more leadership roles and fostering

participation in decision-making roles, and increased youth involvement in communities by providing more opportunities to get involved with youth-focused programs.

- While almost all participants said that their agency was involved in youth development and asset-building activities, respondents from CDP communities more often noted that youth were engaged as active decision-makers in the agency’s plans and activities.

In summary, the needs assessment data suggest that the ACT for Youth initiative impacted adult perceptions of youth in the community. This was the only data source that compares ACT for Youth with non-ACT for Youth communities. Respondents from communities that had ACT for Youth funding reported that youth were viewed positively; respondents perceived that ACT for Youth played a role in increasing youth involvement in their agencies and communities. Additionally, respondents in ACT for Youth communities, more often than “non-ACT” communities, perceived youth to be involved in decision-making roles. Taken together, these data sources tell the story that the core youth development principle of increased youth engagement was successfully infusing into ACT for Youth communities. This was evidenced by the actual increase in meaningful youth roles, and adult perceptions of youth involvement.

Several partners changed their practices around youth involvement as a result of the ACT for Youth initiative. Four organizations engaged youth on their boards for the first time, the Erie County Youth Board now encourages youth to become voting members – and the Board of Education made a commitment to give youth a role at both the building and district level for the school year.

Meaningful Opportunities for Young People

Evidence collected from several different data sources illustrates that youth in the ACT for Youth communities were involved in a wide variety of rich and exciting opportunities to use their voice and participate in decision making. Described below are some of the most visible ways young people in the ACT for Youth communities were engaged in the work of the initiative. The focus was on those roles related to governance that require decision making since these are believed to have the greatest developmental impact. These included participating in the CDP itself, serving on a wide range of committees and councils, and being asked to join major commu-

Success Story Columbia County ACT for Youth

“Our project from the start was to create a teen mentoring/peer counseling kind of service... [The staff person hired through ACT for Youth] recruited teens from local school districts, trained the teens to become peer counselors, supervised those teens within the school districts, and we paid the teens a stipend for their work. It was a very, very successful program. We had 15-20 kids actively involved at any given time...They became visible in the schools - so students would approach our peer counselors, and our peer counselors would give them information, refer them to different resources in the community. It was formulated under the idea that some kids will go to peers before going to the guidance counselor, or the school nurse... The project actually won a state-wide innovative program award from the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault.”

Forms of Youth Governance

CDP Involvement: Youth serve as recognized and valued partners in the CDP.

Community board and committees: Youth serve as members of boards and committees for one or more community institutions or agencies.

Advisory Councils: Youth operate or serve on advisory bodies responsible for providing input into project or agency governance.

Philanthropy: Youth make funding decisions.

Evaluation/Assessment: Youth conduct research used for quality improvement.

nity governance bodies, including School Boards and Youth Boards.

Opportunities for youth to participate in governance or decision making were created in several ACT for Youth communities. In some cases, youth worked in partnership with adults – to set overall policy direction, hire staff, design programs, conduct needs assessments and lead training. A common theme emerged across several data sources: prior to ACT for Youth, youth were not involved in decision-making roles within their communities. Since the initiative, communities have changed their practices by engaging youth in this new capacity and establishing youth on boards, committees, and other community governance structures.

CDP Involvement

At the end of the first year of the initiative none of the CDPs identified youth as members of their partnerships. Three years later, in August 2004, 35 young people were serving as members of the CDPs. This represents a major shift in the way that communities normally operate regarding youth services and program development, from doing things for young people to doing things with young people. Although not all CDPs were successful in bringing youth to the actual partnership table, other mechanisms were created for youth voice, some of which are described below.

Community Boards and Committee Participation

Youth were also invited to join other community-wide boards and committees. Six of the CDPs reported that youth began serving on committees and boards as a result of ACT for Youth efforts. This was significant for many communities that did not have youth in decision-making roles prior to ACT for Youth. Staff in ACT for Youth communities reported that this change was a direct result of their “lobbying” efforts to educate adults in the community about the importance of having youth voice at the table where youth policy and program decisions are made.

“It’s youth voice, it’s not like youth-slash-adults. We make the decisions and we get to decide what goes on and tell the other people to get their ideas and to come back... We choose. It’s really the youth speaking. It makes us feel more responsible, to know that we’re actually, like, the voice for the whole youth.”
 (ACT for Youth participant)

Youth Advisory Councils

Many of the CDPs created Youth Advisory boards and councils to guide them in creating community roles for youth. These councils had a variety of structures, some operating more independently than others. For example, in one partnership, each council established a youth chair responsible for creating the agenda, facilitating the meetings, and serving as a liaison between the council and other agencies and coalitions, including the CDPs. In other councils, youth and adults worked in partnership and shared leadership to carry out the work plan.

Seven of the CDPs formed Youth Councils that carried out a number of functions including:

- Planning and coordinating program activities
- Sponsoring and co-leading training
- Organizing youth forums or speak outs
- Conducting evaluation and assessments

Youth Philanthropy

Six of the CDPs established opportunities in youth philanthropy that involved young people making funding decisions regarding Requests For Proposals and mini-grants. This entailed reviewing and rating proposals and selecting programs to fund. In one community, it was noted that this experience helped youth understand options of bringing about change in their community in a constructive and positive manner.

Young people felt they could make a difference in their community. Whether it involved organizing a battle of the bands concert, speak out, conference, or training, they learned that they could plan and carry out large-scale efforts that brought their communities together

Evaluation and Assessment

Three of the CDPs engaged youth in research roles, either by conducting formal needs assessments and collecting data on community problems, or by evaluating the impact of programs and services. Youth learned research skills, developed tools for data collection, conducted data analysis, and learned to interpret and use research findings.

- One CDP participated in a pilot project to increase youth engagement through a self-assessment process aimed at pro-

Engagement: Youth Benefit by....

- Acquiring leadership skills.
- Learning to feel comfortable voicing opinions and ideas.
- Exposure and appreciation for diverse individuals, ideas and perspectives.
- Increasing their sense of self-efficacy and personal power.

Success Story

The Otsego ACT for Youth initiative involved young people in youth philanthropy – with and for young people. Each year, several thousand dollars were set aside for a mini-grant fund to be used for new summer activities conceived and led by young people. A group of youth worked hand in hand with several adults to develop the grant application and process. They also reviewed all applications, interviewed promising applicants and selected the award recipients.

“This is a really great avenue for the youth to have a setting where they can talk about what ever they want. And to know that... they can get together with other teenagers, they can do linkages. They can say, ‘Hey, I’m not the only one that has this concern. We are concerned about the same thing – why don’t we get together and do something?’”

moting organizational change. A team of four youth evaluators were trained to administer self-assessment tools to the youth councils. They helped interpret the findings and reported back to the councils on possible ways to increase youth participation. The youth evaluators used their skills to develop further youth program assessment tools for the CDP.

- One of the CDPs developed an evaluation process that could be implemented throughout all youth-based organizations in the community. The evaluation model provided organizations with a tool for measuring the degree to which they employ a positive youth development perspective across each of their programs.

Benefits

Data from the series of six focus groups conducted with young people in three of the ACT for Youth CDPs support the con-

clusion that ACT for Youth offered young people a rare opportunity to become meaningfully engaged in programs, agencies, and community institutions. Youth participants consistently cited four main benefits: 1) acquisition of leadership skills, 2) opportunities to use their voice to share opinions and ideas, 3) exposure to diverse individuals, ideas, and perspectives, and 4) increased opportunities to enhance self-efficacy and personal power. Importantly, adults also experience benefits from youth engagement.

Leadership Skills

One of the most frequently mentioned impacts of involvement in ACT for Youth was increased leadership skills. Young people reported that they learned these

“The level of youth involvement has grown considerably since the inception of the CDP. Youth now make up half of the ACT for Youth Advisory Board and distribute community Youth Involvement Grants through a youth philanthropy project.”

skills through planning, arranging logistics, running meetings, talking to community members, and handling finances. This theme recurred in all focus groups and was frequently the first benefit voiced by the focus group participants. Many youth dis-

Success Story

The Capital District CDP organized an effort to map their community. Twenty five students were given disposable cameras to photograph community assets and deficits. Group discussions about the photographs were used to identify themes, which led to the development of projects and events. This photography assignment created student buy-in, documented how youth perceived their communities, provided current information for the CDP steering committee, and helped unify three counties. While out in the community capturing their own perceptions of assets and deficits, the teens educated the community about ACT for Youth, enhancing both the public perception of youth and their own personal experiences. Furthermore, in collaboration with a local public library, young people participated in the development of the new library wing. Their ideas and suggestions were incorporated in the actual design.

cussed specific skill acquisition in writing, decision making, and collaboration. Several reported that the experience would better prepare them for college and potentially influenced their career decisions.

Youth Voice: Willingness to Speak Out

Young people felt that as a result of participating in ACT for Youth, they gained a willingness to speak out and express their opinions and ideas. This profound youth development theme recurred in all of the focus groups. Many reported gaining confidence in expressing themselves, and felt that their participation “brought them out of their shell,” noting that prior to their involvement in ACT for Youth, they were “very, very shy” and actually fearful of speaking in front of audiences, especially around adults. Their experiences through ACT for Youth gave them opportunities to develop public speaking and presentation skills. Opportunities such as participating in Youth Council, organizing a conference or speak out, or conducting a training evoked and nurtured youth voice.

Diversity: Openness to Other Points of View

Another benefit that emerged as a theme in the focus groups was exposure to other points of view. Many youth spoke about the importance of contact with individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives. Through ACT for Youth, young people gained respect and understanding of the diversity of individuals, perspectives, backgrounds, and ideas. This theme

was expressed by youth in both rural and urban focus groups. Young people spoke about learning to look beyond appearances and first impressions to developing a deeper understanding and appreciation for individual differences.

Self Efficacy and Personal Power

When youth experience being heard and taken seriously, they feel empowered to believe in themselves. Young people talked about feeling that they could make a difference in their community. Whether it involved organizing a “battle of the bands” concert, speak out, conference, or training, they learned that they could plan and carry out large-scale efforts that brought their communities together.

Benefits for Adults

Focus group data also revealed the impact of youth engagement on adults. Previous research demonstrates that the involvement of young people in decision making has important positive outcomes for adults (e.g., Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000; Goggins, Powers, & Spano, 2002). Two notable adult benefits of engaged young people in the ACT for Youth communities include:

- Young people provide adults with new ways of thinking, insights, and ideas: One ACT for Youth partner noted the importance and value of youth at the table for generating ideas that adults would not have considered.

“....but that’s the kind of stuff that we

Success Story

Young people and adults from the Brooklyn CDP worked together with the Brooklyn Borough President’s Office to organize and promote a countywide conference on gangs and youth violence prevention. The Youth Alliance, a coalition of young people drawn from within CDP member organizations, also worked with the Borough President’s Office to organize youth “speak-outs” intended to foster dialogue among youth about gang violence in their communities and how to prevent it. The success of the first “speak-out” led to the Youth Alliance being designated by the Borough President’s Office as the forum’s permanent organizer.

would never have done if she [a young person] hadn't been on the team. Wouldn't even have dawned on us. We're all in this adult level, thinking about kids in certain ways. That proves how valuable that is, to have youth involved with it." (ACT for Youth CDP partner)

- Youth also energize staff. This not only benefits adults but, as illustrated in the quote below, ultimately benefits programs and organizations:

"I think the thing that I will take away from my experience in working with this group in particular is their enthusiasm, the enthusiasm of young people. Their wisdom. Because in some ways they're more perceptive than adults could ever be. And I think just the memory of watching this group grow and mature. When I first met Liza, Liza was in eighth grade. She's a senior now. And just having had the opportunity to be a part of their lives. I'm not suggesting that AKITA is a huge part, but it's neat to watch the group grow and evolve and see them take on new responsibilities and new challenges and just come up with these amazing ideas and insights." (ACT for Youth coordinator)

Lessons Learned

Each CDP approached the task of increasing youth engagement in a creative way. However, there are some overarching lessons that can be drawn from their collective experience:

1. **Meaningful youth engagement can take different forms and expressions.** Youth representation on a board of directors is not necessarily the first or only step toward youth engagement. It is helpful to think about a range of opportunities for young people to influence programs, organizations, and community initiatives. Young people can make decisions and give input on the program level through

planning, implementing, and evaluating tasks and projects. Or they can provide input and consultation on program or organizational policies and practices by expressing their perspective and reflecting on their experiences. Some young people might have the motivation and commitment to joining decision-making bodies, such as hiring committees or boards of directors. Young people will choose levels of involvement that match their skills, interests, and situations. Over time, young people might move into different roles according to changing interests and skills.

2. **Activities and services provided for youth need to be universally accessible and should not be limited to specific "at risk" or "high risk" groups.** Such specific targeting leads to stigma and decreased youth engagement. The Brooklyn CDP used a language of universal, non-targeted services for youth development which was integral to all activities, services, and programs run by ACT for Youth. They directly attributed their success in youth engagement to the fact that no youth would be turned away, no labels were attached to participation, and services and programs were not offered as part of a "service package;" rather they were framed as an exciting set of opportunities for youth to get involved in their community.
3. **Recognize that logistics, location, environment, and time will always play a key role in establishing youth voice.** Adults need to be flexible in order to accommodate young people who wish to attend meetings. Meetings should be held at times which allow young people to participate. One CDP held meetings at school so that students active in the ACT for Youth Advisory group in that district were able to attend.

4. ***Finding the right staff is critical to success.*** It is important to find staff who are energetic, passionate, and committed individuals who are genuinely excited about working with youth. Youth recognize when adults are being forced to take part in an activity. Participation on the part of adults should reflect genuine interest and concern.
5. ***Youth and adults need preparation for youth engagement.*** Providing pre-service orientation, training, and ongoing support in the form of mentoring or coaching throughout the program helps engage and retain youth. Establishing a high degree of structure (such as a manual with outlined responsibilities and expectations) as well as standards and personnel review processes also facilitates success. In addition, adults need to be oriented and trained to work with youth and to overcome pre-conceived notions they might have about young people. Ongoing relationship building through team building exercises and a mechanism for reflection will strengthen authentic youth-adult partnership formation in the organization.
6. ***True engagement is more likely to happen when youth lead and direct while adults provide guidance and support.*** If youth have more say in the direction and operational maintenance of programs and activities, their engagement levels increase and they will be more likely to remain over time. Adults who provide support through a mentorship approach are most effective in enabling youth leadership.

“If you let kids lead, if you let them make the assessment of what needs to be done in the community and look at what the resources are and then come up with some suggestions and some answers, I think it’s going to truly take off. If adults get involved and they start to tell the kids what to do, I don’t think it’s going to be as successful.” (CDP Coordinator)
7. ***Advisory groups should have a clear purpose and function linked with community action.*** Advisory groups should identify their purpose and then link their work to community issues that impact youth. This facilitates retention and can lead to concrete actions and potential community policy change.
8. ***Youth should be given “tiered leadership” opportunities for upward organizational movement.*** When youth observe upward role mobility (e.g. from participant to intern to staff) within the program/organization, they are encouraged to view this as an opportunity to serve in a greater capacity while also furthering their personal and leadership development. Those in higher roles serve as role models and mentor those in lower roles.
9. ***Celebrate and recognize youth for their accomplishments.*** It is important to take the time to recognize young people for achieving their goals and for their involvement in the community. Opportunities to highlight youth accomplishments through newspaper and TV stories, as well as recognition through award ceremonies promote the positive message that young people are contributors and resources. ●

“If you let kids lead, if you let them make the assessment of what needs to be done in the community and look at what the resources are and then come

EXEMPLAR: Brokklyn Act for Youth

In the Brooklyn ACT for Youth partnership, youth engagement was central and inspired creativity, drove innovation and resulted in significant success. At the center of youth engagement efforts were eight core programs that varied from fashion and music production to youth court and community evaluation teams. The common ingredient flexibility. A continuous evaluation strategy allowed for ongoing changes as necessary. The adult leadership felt this was necessary in order to respond to the rapidly changing interests of youth and the necessity of having youth participation in the development and planning of programming. Youth participated in the creation of standards and behavioral rules and provided peer monitoring to ensure clear and consistent implementation. While the youth in these programs received ongoing support and guidance from the adults, they were ultimately responsible for shaping the direction and focus of programs and services that were available to their peers across the New York City metropolitan area.

The mission statement adopted by the young people involved in the Brooklyn CDP best captures this partnership's success around youth engagement:

"ACT for Youth empowers youth to be creators – rather than consumers – of their culture."



OUTCOME FOUR: ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Introduction

The ACT for Youth initiative defines organizational change as “*changes among community organizations and institutions reflecting youth development principles, including changes in organizational structures, philosophy, tools, and physical environments.*” This outcome area challenged community partnerships to intentionally institutionalize youth development concepts into their organizations.

For most community partnerships this was new territory. This outcome area developed and operationalized gradually over the first three years of the project. Central questions included: 1) How can CDPs measure the various youth development promotion strategies that impacted youth services and community partners? 2) What concrete changes have taken place within organizations and within the partnership? With assistance from the Centers of Excellence, CDPs started to assess organizational policies and practices and began to develop new and additional youth development-oriented strategies and practices.

Over the course of the fourth and fifth years, CDPs made measurable strides in promoting organizational change with respect to individual organizations as well as community partnerships. CDP activities in this area tended to fall into several discrete areas: 1) developing a common youth development language across and within CDP member agencies, 2) creation of opportunities for engaging staff in the ACT for Youth initiative, 3) mechanisms for incorporating youth voice into organizational functioning, and 4) organizational assessment and action planning.

Organizational change as a strategic process within (and among) CDP organizations was one of the most challenging undertak-

Organizational Change Happens When CDP's...

- Utilize an organizational assessment process to understand current practices, policies and assumptions and to develop enhanced practices.
- Articulate a clear vision and strategy for accomplishing organizational change and willingly share these with other interested stakeholders.
- Agree upon and consistently use a common Youth Development language.
- Successfully advocate for change in CDP organizations.
- Provide quality training for young people in how to become change agents.
- Recognize and support opportunities for building the formal and informal infrastructure that facilitates youth development informed organizational change.

ings that CDPs confronted over the course of this five-year initiative. Several themes emerged as examples of organizational change but each site incorporated youth development principles and practice to varying degrees.

Developing a Common Youth Development Language

Although youth development frameworks emphasize common core components, such as youth voice and community and organizational change, there was little consistency

in the way community groups talked about youth development. Therefore, one of the first tasks that CDPs undertook was defining core youth development principles and delineating best practices for individual

“...so much of our work is geared towards the kids that are getting in trouble—we were definitely viewing them as at-risk. We weren’t looking to word things in a positive manner. But we’ve realized through our participation that so many of these kids have so much to offer. So now, we’ve begun to word things in a much more positive, asset-based manner.”

and member agencies. Prior to involvement in the ACT for Youth initiative, CDP members held a variety of assumptions, understandings, and acceptance of youth development approaches. This was complicated by the fact that two of the most dominant youth development approaches in place when ACT for Youth was launched, Communities That Care and the Search Institute, advocated quite different, but highly interrelated strategies for approaching positive youth development.

Two of the 11 CDPs had members who made significant strides in mandating a common language within their organizations and across their community by mak-

ing outcomes-based and youth development-oriented language a prerequisite for incoming funding proposals. One CDP member now requires those interested in receiving an application to attend a Bidders Forum in which the first hour involves training on positive youth development and how to incorporate the core principles into their organization.

Creating Opportunities for Engaging Staff in the ACT for Youth Initiative

Creating and sustaining organizational change is almost entirely dependent on influencing changes in assumptions, behavior, and processes that keep agencies running day-to-day. Many CDP members realized early on that encouraging (or in one case mandating) all in-house agency staff to be involved in youth development training enhanced the likelihood that organizational change would occur. It also increased the likelihood that the agencies they work with would adopt a youth development perspective beyond the ACT for Youth initiative and that agency staff would benefit from direct exposure to the diverse youth involved in the ACT for Youth initiative. CDPs ensured staff engagement in the ACT for Youth initiative through Centers of Excellence training. Results from the 2005 CDP survey confirm the positive relationship between Center of Excellence youth development training (and technical

Success Story

The Jefferson County Office of Probation, an ACT for Youth partner agency, has made considerable changes to the way that correction officers approach their interactions with youth as a result of their participation in the initiative. For example, the department no longer designs enforcement plans, but rather works one-on-one with the juvenile, family courts and parents to design treatment plans to address the individual assets and needs of each young person. The asset language has also been incorporated in the Youth Assessment Screening Instrument (YASI) that the Office of Probation uses to design individual treatment plans for youth offenders. “As a supervisor with the Probation Family Court Unit, I felt that my officers needed to see the positive things that kids can do because we are routinely exposed and have to address the negative issues. I wanted to be able to counteract the negative language that seems to creep into our day-to-day work with these kids.”

assistance) and organizational change for their staff and board of directors.

For some partnerships, engaging their organizations' staff members in youth development activities meant setting up permanent systems for participation. For example, one CDP partner routinely mandated that staff members in her organization volunteer on youth councils and participate in training on the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets for Youth. Providing resources and engaging staff at every level of an organization helps to ensure that they can become asset builders in their professional and personal lives, as well as in the larger community.

Youth Development Training for Public and Private Community Agencies

One of the ways in which CDP members effected organizational change within and across agencies throughout the community was through youth development training and technical assistance. Many devised complex outreach strategies to offer tailored trainings in youth voice and youth decision making to county school districts, government agencies, and local nonprofits. They also offered training to organizations on whose boards individual CDP members served or with whom they were otherwise connected.

- In one CDP, members made significant strides in the creation of organizational change by providing training for staff in county government agencies. This training helped county agency staff working with youth orient themselves to youth development principles, as well as increase youth participation in county agency structures and processes.
- Other partnerships offered 28 hours of Advancing Youth Development (AYD) training in conjunction with their local

youth bureaus. The aim of the training was to offer opportunities for community organizations to receive in-depth information on positive youth development principles. One CDP provided training tailored to the needs of clinical staff, with the aim of incorporating an asset assessment into their youth and family profiles.

In branching out beyond the immediate scope of their partnership, CDP members were able to provide training in youth development principles and practices to a diverse array of organizations within their community. Providing resources and engaging staff at every level of an organization helps to ensure that they can become asset builders in their professional and personal lives.

Incorporating Youth Voice Into Organizations

Often the greatest challenge for CDPs lay not in training other community organizations, but in preparing their individual agencies and partnership to facilitate and sustain youth involvement. Nevertheless, CDPs frequently cited enhanced youth voice as an example of successful organizational change.

In many cases, CDPs began to reap benefits from their labor only at the end of the five year period. Youth leadership in community agencies and government systems gathered momentum over the course of the initiative. The outcomes were positive and powerful. For example, one CDP member was instrumental in getting one of the first youth members in New York State on their local school board. Three local partners have a youth advisory group attached to their local town governments. And finally, another CDP reported that they routinely include youth as part of their interview and hiring teams.

Organizational Self-Assessments

One of the challenges that CDPs faced throughout the ACT for Youth initiative was how to authentically integrate youth development principles and practices, including youth voice, into their individual organizations. To meet this challenge, the Centers of Excellence worked with the CDPs to provide training and technical assistance in the area of organizational self-assessment. CDPs learned how to use information gathered through the organizational self-assessment process to improve their practice. The information provided programs and partnerships with comprehensive feedback from all members about perceived successes and challenges, as well as ideas for the future. Ongoing interest in this area led to development of a popular and widely used standardized Center of Excellence training in organizational self-assessments for youth development principles and practices.

During the last two years, eight organizations from various CDPs opted to undertake organizational self-assessments that focused specifically on examining the overall health of their organizations from a legal, governance, planning, and fundraising perspective. For one CDP, the process of engaging in an organizational self-assessment resulted in significant changes to staff and partners' understanding of youth development principles and practices. In February 2004, agency staff, board members and volunteers gathered to discuss potential roles for youth within their programs and to fill out a survey about their attitudes regarding young people. Overall,

those who completed the survey felt significant benefits to youth involvement, but also agreed that a number of important barriers prevented them from infusing youth throughout their organizations. As a result of the organizational self-assessment, lead agency staff and CDP members used the data to customize workshops and trainings offered through the Centers of Excellence. In addition, the ACT for Youth Coordinator's job description was altered to reflect a revised set of responsibilities specifically geared to enhancing collaborations and creating linkages with youth across all county programs.

Another CDP trained nearly 75 youth-serving organizations and youth bureaus in the county to use a comprehensive evaluation and organizational readiness tool developed by Dr. Jonathan Klein from the University of Rochester, a partner of the Upstate Center of Excellence. Since most organizations in the area were not familiar with the youth outcome framework which emphasizes both youth involvement and adult-youth partnerships, staff and administrators of community agencies received 15 hours of training on how to incorporate each of these youth development practices into their organization. In the future, these agencies will be tracked by their funding sources to ensure that they are accomplishing these goals.

Other CDPs chose to work intensively with individual organizations, examining ways that they could begin to encourage increased youth voice, given their specific programmatic needs. For example, one CDP worked with a local nonprofit

Success Story

The Onondaga County ACT for Youth initiative organized a series of workshops on "Successfully Involving Youth in Decision-Making" for all local county departments. The goal was to educate departments on youth development and to encourage them to establish a mechanism for youth voice in their departments. Three departments embraced the concept of youth engagement, and plans are currently underway to make it happen.

on strategies for building youth presence on their decision-making board to help determine ways that they could encourage more young people to participate in their organizational activities.

Lessons Learned

Despite the challenging nature of this outcome, CDPs made evident strides toward important youth development-oriented organizational change over the past five years. Several lessons can be drawn from their experience.

1. Identify at the onset of the initiative that change at the organizational level is an intended outcome. How much emphasis an individual CDP put on the objective of organizational change was often determined during the very preliminary planning stages of the initiative. For some, organizational and community change was the primary objective of their involvement in ACT for Youth; for this reason their activities focused on training and education activities for staff, youth, and other community organizations. The most sustainable CDPs focused on changing organizational and systemic assumptions, behaviors, and processes at the outset of their initiative.
2. Create an environment of organizational commitment and trust. Change is hard for many people and cannot be successfully accomplished in an environment of confusion or mistrust. Staff need to feel comfortable in discussing changes (and perceived impacts) with leaders and trust that those leaders will continue to be open and communicative about the purpose of the change, as well as new expectations of staff.
3. Provide a deeper level of training and technical assistance regarding creating sustainable, youth development oriented organizational change. Several CDPs commented that training and technical assistance provided throughout the initiative was invaluable in providing partners with an understanding of strategies for organizational change. However, members felt they would be even more successful if the initiative offered ongoing, one-on-one, organization- and community-specific consultation with community agencies.
4. Organizational change must be linked with activities and training for youth. For many CDPs, organizational change was seen as important, but not at the cost of maintaining quality services, opportunities, and supports for the youth that they served. Others viewed the two outcomes as equally vital and as interconnected goals for their work within the initiative. In fact, CDPs routinely commented that services and training opportunities provided through the ACT for Youth initiative created an increased number of opportunities for organizations to view youth in a positive light—thus, encouraging many providers to want to work towards youth development-related organizational change. The most sustainable CDPs focused on organizational and systemic changes while also offering varied youth services, opportunities, and supports. ●

EXEMPLAR: Greene County ACT for Youth

Greene County ACT for Youth enthusiastically embraced the opportunity of this grant to facilitate organizational change for the benefit of youth in their communities. The primary focus, and achievement, in this area was the adoption of an infrastructure that facilitates inter-organizational relations. This structure provides an operational umbrella for leadership, management, and governance. The CDP established norms for shared decision making, problem solving, conflict resolution and resource allocations. This structure facilitated shared integrative services among partner organizations and a single point of entry for youth and families seeking involvement in ACT for Youth offerings. Adopting this strategy allowed partner organizations to depend on each other and establish specialty areas. Ultimately, that created a more supportive environment for the youth served through this partnership. Greene County ACT for Youth partners concluded that, *“We’re better than we gave ourselves credit for. [ACT for Youth] didn’t just empower youth – it empowered adults. It enabled the people of this county to see and say, ‘We have assets!’”* ● ●

OUTCOME FIVE: COMMUNITY POLICY CHANGE

Introduction

One of the most distinguishing features of the ACT for Youth model is its focus on community policy change. More than any other youth development initiative put forth in recent years, ACT for Youth aimed to effect positive outcomes for youth by instituting policy changes reflecting youth development principles in schools and local government agencies. For many, this meant leveraging the networks and resources within their partnership to affect attitudes about youth, create improved systems for collecting community-level information, creating improved designs for delivering services, and incorporating youth development principles and practice into their area school districts.

Creating lasting community-level change is a long-term process, requiring sustained commitment of resources. Research suggests that the time needed to implement community change is typically ten years in order to ensure that efforts become institutionalized within the community. To this end, the ACT for Youth CDPs often served as the spark for changing the environment in communities, changing attitudes about youth, providing training, affecting schools and government—all of which were necessary precursors to larger, community-level change.

Summary of Key Trends

For most CDPs, the simple act of creating and sustaining a community-wide collaboration of partners focused on implementing youth development principles and practice was in itself the most profound community policy change. Although CDPs reported that an understanding of youth development was present in their commu-

Community Policy Change Occurs When...

- Local funders (such as the United Way) incorporate youth development principles into funding requirements.
- There is increased youth advocacy on political and community issues.
- Agencies create opportunities for young people to present to school/government committees.
- There is increased public understanding and support of youth development.
- Proposed policy changes have the backing of a diverse and influential set of stakeholders.
- School and government groups are educated and aware of youth development principles.

nities before ACT for Youth, few said that they actually had the structures in place to support moving a youth development agenda forward within schools, local government, or their own organizations.

Within in the first three years of the initiative, CDPs were already using their newly formed collaborations to enact a number of community policy changes within their communities.

Table 5.1 summarizes these preliminary strategies as reported from ten of the eleven CDPs.

Despite challenges both in terms of individual CDP understanding of what constitutes a community policy change and the lengthy process of enacting actual changes to long-standing community institutions

TABLE 5.1 NUMBER OF CDPs REPORTING COMMUNITY POLICY CHANGE ACTIVITIES (2000-2003)

<i>Strategy for Community Policy Change Activity</i>	<i>Number of CDPs Reporting</i>
Identify initial strategies/action plan	4
Action step cited	4
Public awareness-raising	3
Identify policy agenda	3
Advocating with community policy groups	2
Establishing new community policy groups	2
Community policy change(s) accomplished	2
Youth advocacy	1

(such as schools and human services agencies) partnerships began to make some headway into changing the environment for youth development in their communities. As a result, a number of common themes emerged among those CDPs that were successful in creating youth development policy changes among community institutions.

- CDPs used their collaborations as a vehicle for expanding the available services and programs for youth, redefining human service departments, and creating new schools that employ youth development principles and practice.
- The ACT for Youth initiative was the impetus for the creation of other community partnerships for youth.
- CDPs employed a number of innovative strategies for affecting community attitudes and outcomes for youth; among these were training, public education campaigns, school and community surveys, and media campaigns.
- One of the most significant community policy changes enacted by CDPs was the creation of new community-level information systems for youth and their families.

Understanding the Importance of Collaboration

One of the most fundamental community policy changes reported by each of the eleven CDPs was the creation and/or support of a collaborative, community-wide framework aimed at building an infrastructure for supporting youth-serving organizations and agencies. The simple act of bringing together influential community leaders in order to work together, share resources, build strategies, and leverage networks created a lasting change within each community. CDPs commented that regardless of whether or not there is available funding in the future to support the work they do, the ACT for Youth initiative created a web of support among schools, government agencies, and community nonprofits that will serve them for years to come. When asked about the impact of ACT for Youth on the community, one CDP partner replied that one of the most tangible outcomes of the initiative was that it had “united school systems with community providers, clubs, etc.”, as well as “*opened up the possibility of several potential community partnerships and collaborations among other community agencies.*”

Vehicle for Expanding Available Services/Programs for Youth

One of the most tangible outcomes for those CDPs that were successful in collaborating was the expansion of the number of available services for youth throughout their communities. According to the

“Increased services for youth are a direct result of an increased number of community partnerships that were formed because of ACT for Youth. These new partnerships signal a positive community policy change that will continue to be present beyond the life of the initiative.”

2005 CDP Collaboration Survey, two-thirds of survey respondents reported that youth development programs in their community developed or expanded as a result of collabora-

tion through the ACT for Youth initiative. Among one CDP the proportion was even greater—86%. Among those new services that were expanded as a result of collaboration are summer employment programs, harm reduction, Girl Scouts troops, faith-based groups, peer support networks, and youth violence prevention programming.

One CDP took collaboration strategies and best practices to other community-level partnerships in the area. In doing this, they ensured that the message of the ACT for Youth initiative was embedded in other community policy-making institutions, such as school districts. In the case of this CDP, partners worked to build the capacity of a coalition of after-school service providers. Over the course of several months, they worked with teams of programs to provide the skills and direct resources needed to begin the process of building a common set of policies, youth development data, and benchmarks

for success. This same CDP used their knowledge of working collaboratively to provide training and technical assistance to a coalition of youth violence prevention groups. Through training, these groups were provided with resources that enabled them to build improved relationships with neighborhood police precincts, including a newly created homicide unit. Training provided through the CDP also provided this coalition with the tools they needed to successfully mediate a truce between area gangs and establish a number of new after-school recreational programs.

Reducing Duplication within Human Service Agencies

Increased collaboration also had another profound, observable effect on community policy. Over the course of the initiative, members of two CDPs were faced with the prospect of redesigning county-level human services departments. In one CDP, the need to reduce duplication in service delivery manifested itself in a county-wide reorganization of human services. Due to ACT for Youth’s influence, members of the redesign team successfully advocated incorporating key youth development principles and practices into the county redesign. This included improved systems for client referrals between agencies, incorporation of strengths-based perspectives into programs, reduction of service duplication, and creation of formal systems for staff members to share strategies and best practices. In response to the changes in her community, one partner said, *“I really think that there is a lot more coverage in service provision within our county and I believe this can be attributed to the opportunities created by the ACT for Youth grant.”*

Partners felt that this reorganization came about because there was a countywide realization, due in part to the work of the collaborative, that human services were

being delivered in separate service systems, or “silos”, resulting in duplicate services being provided to a number of families. One partner said, *“I mean you had families that could be in two or three services within a department and there wasn’t any coordination between Children’s Services and the Department of Social Services. There was a real need to do a better job of integrating and coordinating our human service delivery system.”* County executives turned to the work of the county’s ACT for Youth partnership in the area when formulating a blueprint for reorganization. The result was a direct infusion of the youth development framework into the agency objectives of the County Department of Family Services, the Department of Health, and other related youth-serving community organizations.

Educational Institutions and a Youth Development Approach

Schools and school districts provided rich grounds for enacting community policy changes through the ACT for Youth initiative. Throughout the course of the initiative, schools were notoriously challenging environments to gain entry to and maintain a presence in for CDPs. However, two CDPs took a unique approach to the idea of integrating youth development into

their area school districts and in the meantime generated two of the most significant institutions for community policy change to come out of the ACT for Youth initiative.

For one CDP, the challenge of making headway into their area school district was compounded by issues of political red tape and suspicion among educators. Partners, many of whom were involved with the area Beacon school, decided to pool their financial, staff, and training resources to create a new kind of school—one that reflected their commitment to implementing a strength-based youth development perspective in the classroom. A new high school created by members of this ACT for Youth CDP opened in Fall 2004 and is the first of its kind in the borough. Members feel it plays a significant role in the continuing effort to bridge the traditionally divergent realms of school and after-school time. In conceptualizing the high school, educators, youth development organizations, community agencies, and community businesses came together to explore ways to address the disconnect between the school and the after school environments in order to offer students a continuous and complete educational experience rather than a fragmented one.

Success Story

The Yonkers CDP developed and implemented an alternative school for middle school students experiencing behavioral and disciplinary problems in their usual school setting. Employing a youth development approach, the alternative school affords the opportunity for young people to re-engage with the school setting and then return to their original school. Young people enter the school as a group, spend the full school day with a team of teachers and seasoned, community-based youth workers, and participate in a range of academic, cultural, recreational, and life skills activities. Although most students entered the program at serious risk for dropping out of school, the vast majority returned to the traditional school setting and successfully re-engaged. According to the ACT for Youth lead agency, over 90% of young people in this high school successfully mainstreamed back into the public school system. In addition, these youth built enduring relationships with staff at a community center with deep roots and a long history of engagement with young people in the community. Indicative of this program’s overwhelming success, the model was replicated with other groups within the Yonkers school system.

While many of the CDPs made significant strides in working with their existing school districts to effect community policy change, these two examples provide a unique understanding of how new collaborations affected community and school policy. Through their work together as part of the ACT for Youth initiative, community and municipal organizations sought new, innovative strategies for addressing persistent challenges.

Community Level Understanding of Youth Development

As evidenced by some of the other outcomes in this report, building a common language or a common understanding of youth development practice and principles was in itself a significant achievement of the ACT for Youth initiative. For organizations, building a common language can lead to increased funding, reduced duplication of services, and greater staff involvement in youth development activities. For communities, building a common understanding and language of youth development practice and principles can have an even broader effect by changing the ways that community leaders, school districts, and municipalities address the needs of young people. CDPs made inroads to create sustainable change in the overall community climate by building the amount of information available about the needs of youth, and having an impact on the way adults viewed young people as a whole.

- Quality information about outcomes for youth can be a driving force in creating public policy that better serves young people and their families.
- Survey data that highlights the needs and existing assets of young people creates better informed and better serving schools, educators, and communities.
- Creating forums to share information about youth through public education

campaigns, community town halls, and needs assessments engages community and business leaders in creating positive outcomes for youth.

- Increased information and demonstration regarding the strengths of young people was a catalyst for changing community attitudes and building awareness about youth development. Intergenerational activities, conducted by many CDPs, can provide the mechanism through which adults and youth begin to more fully understand and respect one another.
- Information given through community training and public education campaigns exposes staff working at human services agencies to a youth development perspective.
- Most importantly, quality information or suggestions collected directly from young people gives adolescents a voice in creating the kinds of schools and community institutions that will support their long-term growth.

Using Survey Data to Inform Programming for Youth

Over the course of this initiative, several CDPs employed surveys as a way of identifying youth assets and community attitudes. Most often, surveys were employed within area school districts as a way of garnering additional information about the relative strengths and needs of young people. CDPs who utilized this approach often coupled survey implementation with large-scale outreach efforts to educators and school boards. The results were then shared with the community at large. Information collected through youth surveys acted as a community catalyst by providing key school and county officials with valuable data on how to better advocate or create improved services and supports for young people.

In some cases, survey information acted as a way of building strong collaborations between schools and communities. One ACT for Youth lead agency applied the results of their county-wide survey as an opportunity to conduct intensive outreach and technical assistance with area school districts. Over the course of several months, members of the lead agency and the CDP worked with school districts to formulate action plans to address the survey results. The action plan included several months of intensive technical assistance to area schools on how they could use the data to increase youth-adult partnerships by strengthening their collaborations across schools and community organizations. The completion of this broad-scale community change effort involved bringing the survey results and the lessons learned to the entire community in order to foster a sense of shared responsibility for creating and sustaining positive outcomes for youth. The CDP brought together parents, business leaders, community members, and educators together in a town hall meeting as a way of collectively establishing the community's priorities for fostering youth development.

Addressing Community Attitudes through Public Education Events

CDPs worked throughout the initiative to build community-level understanding of youth development practices and principles. The answer for several collaborations included full-scale community outreach, including public education campaigns. These campaigns provided an excellent vehicle for reaching out to community members and institutions and educating them about youth development, while also engaging young people in the process of community mobilization.

The different strategies that CDPs employed for launching public education campaigns varied according to available resources, existing networks among CDP members, connections with the media, and relative ability to mobilize young people and community members. Strategies used for executing public education events in CDP communities included:

- An official proclamation naming June “ACT for Youth Month” four years running.
- Creating a media campaign to raise awareness in the community about positive youth development and youth assets.
- Developing a public service program, called The Asset Approach, that highlights a different community stakeholder each week, focusing on the work that person has done in building asset-focused programming.
- Running a weekly article in local newspapers that highlights the extraordinary achievement of an ACT for Youth participant.
- Conducting a series of public education events aimed at bringing young people and adults together as a way of creating an intergenerational space for promoting positive outcomes for youth. In one CDP, 300 youth and adults gathered to share their ideas on a number of topics including domestic abuse, HIV/AIDS, youth violence, and risky sexual activity.

As one CDP partner commented, “*The biggest change in our community is to even consider giving youth a voice.*” Public education campaigns that focused on the work of the ACT for Youth initiative were a way that CDPs engaged young people's voices in creating lasting community policy changes.

Advocating for Community Policy Changes

With the increasing strength and acceptance of youth voice and youth engagement, several community partnerships recruited and supported young people in their efforts to challenge and change institutional policies and practices. Youth in several ACT for Youth sites challenged attendance policies of their respective school districts. They asked for more lenient attendance policies to allow young people to participate in leadership and civic engagement opportunities. In another example, young people spoke out at a legislative breakfast for local and regional politicians, advocating for a rural school district to open the facility for after-school activities. The school district had set very strict rules about not using the grounds and buildings for any after-school activities posting signs of “no trespassing”. They succeeded in engaging several politicians and school administrators to take on their cause.

Lessons Learned

The innovative work produced under the umbrella of this ambitious outcome yielded some important lessons to inform future initiatives:

1. ***Five years is a challenging timeframe for CDPs to develop exemplary, sustainable community policy change within their communities.*** Many CDPs witnessed community-level changes emerging as a result of the work completed over the past five years.

Evidence collected over the course of this initiative indicates that equal amounts of success in the other four outcome areas are inextricably linked to advances in community policy change. Continued support plays an instrumental role in ensuring current change efforts become institutionalized within the communities.

2. ***CDPs benefit from having a clear definition of community policy change and benchmarks in place for achieving that change.*** In order to achieve community policy change, CDPs need clear and achievable steps along the course of the initiative. These steps or benchmarks must be clearly defined for partnerships at the outset of the initiative, so that CDPs have time to create strategic plans for addressing each benchmark and reporting their success. Setting benchmarks creates an incremental system that ensures sustainable structures for promoting youth development practice and principles within communities.
3. ***Community change is dependent on strong leaders and a lead agency with a strong base of networks, resources and understanding of the overall vision of the initiative.*** Leadership matters! Having a strong lead agency plays a significant and positive role in involving key community stakeholders. Strong lead agencies and charismatic coordinators were also important forces in maintaining a strong vision for the initiative and sharing

Success Story

The Cattaraugus County ACT for Youth initiative sponsored four family resource centers in rural school districts. One center was very successful in creating many activities and opportunities for young people and their families. The local school board threatened to close the center in year four (2003-2004). ACT for Youth partners and young people rallied to save the center. They made presentations to the school board, talked to the local media, and mobilized many community members especially parents to come to board meetings. Their efforts were successful in keeping the center open.

this vision with other key institutions (public and private) throughout the community.

4. ***Engage “high-level” community leaders in the earliest stages of planning and implementation of the initiative.*** Key leadership consists of community-level officials who balance a commitment to educating others in a youth development approach, while maintaining the political capacity to generate and accelerate change among area decision-making entities. Community leaders have been a significant force in bringing organizations and community groups into the ACT for Youth initiative and in advocating for the general mission and purpose of the initiative.
5. ***Standardized data collection systems are crucial for capturing information about creating and sustaining community policy change initiatives.*** Standardized data systems across CDPs and Centers of Excellence are an important first step in beginning to collect quality longitudinal data about community and organizational change. In order to achieve this, a set of standardized data tools that include a mix of quantitative and qualitative information should be employed across each ACT for Youth site.
6. ***CDPs that were successful in creating sustainable community policy changes created a place in their collaboration for engaging other initiatives within their community.***
7. ***There is a positive correlation between sustainable community policy change and CDPs that involved a diverse array of partners and community stakeholders.*** CDPs that were successful in creating community-level change recognized the importance of drawing diverse organizations

into their partnership from a very early stage in the initiative. A large web of stakeholders not only allowed for multiple perspectives on promoting a community youth development agenda but it also gave partnerships the ability to leverage a considerably larger networks of individuals throughout their area. Success for partnerships in this area meant: they were able provide youth development training to larger numbers of community organizations; they had increased numbers of groups willing to dedicate resources to the initiative; they worked to break down separate, and unconnected service delivery systems through increased networking opportunities; and they could begin to apply for future funding collaboratively with other youth-serving agencies in their area.

8. ***Schools and educators play an important role in the process of creating and sustaining community policy change.*** Without question, schools and educators played a crucial role in the ACT for Youth initiative. Schools and educators play an important role in a young person’s day-to-day life, especially when it comes to encouraging community involvement, providing leadership opportunities and promoting youth development. School districts play an equally significant role, promoting similar opportunities and policy changes for young people on the community level. For many partnerships, success in creating community level policy change came as a result of forming sustainable and trusting partnerships with local school districts. Districts provided fertile ground for collecting information about young people’s assets, providing youth development training for educators, and creating connections between community members and ACT for Youth. ●

EXEMPLAR: Erie County ACT for Youth

The Erie County ACT for Youth initiative embraced the Search Institute's asset framework. Initially, the core partnership, in particular the lead agency Erie 1 BOCES, set out to educate the youth service and education communities about the developmental asset philosophy. The partnership used a range of effective strategies to reach out to various sectors, from large-scale trainings with well known speakers to one-on-one outreach and education. Key government and school officials were instrumental in promoting the goal of transforming Erie County into an asset building community. In the second year of the initiative, the Erie County Executive signed a proclamation declaring Erie County an asset building community.

The next step was to involve the larger community in asset building. The partnership decided to use the Search survey as a mobilization tool. The survey results provide a snapshot of how young people are doing in the community at any given time and can be used to engage larger community groups in action planning to make improvements in the schools and the community.

The partnership was able to conduct the survey in all school districts in the county, reaching 50,000 8th and 11th graders. This was not a small undertaking given the diverse economic makeup of the county. Using the format of town meetings, youth and adult teams started to present the survey findings to school and community groups. As a result of this effort, new relationships formed between school and community groups and concrete action plans were developed and implemented. Additionally, the City of Buffalo school district and board committed to move this process forward by utilizing survey results to improve school environment and climate. ● ●

CONCLUSION

In 2000, the New York State Department of Health launched the ACT for Youth initiative in order to promote community-level change in approaches to preventing violence, abuse, and risky sexual activity among youth ages 10-19 by using a positive youth development strategy. Five years of this initiative delivered a number of promising results for communities involved in the ACT for Youth initiative. Many of these results point to the critical role that community partnerships play in laying a sustainable foundation for youth development practices and principles.

The findings discussed throughout this report indicate that the ACT for Youth initiative made significant progress in building community capacity through cross-sector partnerships and increased community attention on adolescent developmental needs and capacities – two core theoretical underpinnings of youth development frameworks (Gambone et al, 2002). The infrastructure laid in many of the ACT for Youth communities during these five years provides the basis for creating long term change in organizational and community-level policy and practice. Many of these changes altered the way key individuals and institutions regard and treat young people.

In sum, the ACT for Youth initiative imparts a number of overall accomplishments and lessons:

- Cross-agency and cross-sector partnerships are worthwhile investments, are critical for stimulating and promoting community change, and are most successful when supported by strong leadership within the lead agency, community, and collaborative entity. The new and improved cross-sector community partnerships in place represent systems working together, many for the first time. These partnerships were the essential vehicle driving the initiative at the community level.
- All community partnerships learned a great deal about positive youth development principles and practices and about how to create sustainable momentum and change.
- All communities strengthened and created services, opportunities, and supports that enable youth to transition to adulthood with increased competencies, confidence, and positive experiences.
- Communities have a broader understanding of youth voice and understand more clearly the activities and mechanisms that allow youth to have voice, choice and increased responsibilities in the development of their environment and lives.
- There was substantial progress on increasing authentic youth engagement efforts beyond token inclusion of young people. All sites made progress in viewing youth as resources and/or experts, but high-level youth engagement where youth are equal partners was a challenging process for many of the ACT for Youth CDPs. Similar to the process of creating sustainable community policy change, youth engagement represents a cultural shift away from deeply embedded societal norms of youth-adult interaction. This shift requires tenacity and additional committed resources beyond the original five year plan.
- New positive strategies and relationships emerged with non-traditional and sometimes hard-to-engage partners such as schools, justice/law enforcement, parents, and business. Particularly hard-to-reach constituencies such as education and law enforcement have made significant progress in coming to the table to understand how environmental con-

texts effect positive youth development. There is still room for improvement in engaging these constituencies, as well as involving parents and youth; however, ACT for Youth has broken barriers and forged new commonalities among these key stakeholder groups.

- Furthermore, funder support for positive youth development initiatives is more apparent today than when this process began five years ago. Cross-sector fertilization has occurred: local economic development, school board, and juvenile justice plans, as well as other requests for funding proposals, are more likely to ask for or require positive, demonstrated impact for community youth.

Will the ACT for Youth initiative succeed in reducing risk behavior and increasing positive outcomes for youth in ACT communities? Ultimately, this question is unclear. Not only is it very difficult to measurably alter community social, political, and economic topographies; accurately capturing the nature and extent of change is something not all scholars agree can be accurately accomplished (Connell et al, 1995). Nevertheless, although research on the long-term impact of community-level initiatives such as ACT for Youth is mixed (see evaluation of demonstration projects using the Communities that Care model: Crow et. al., 2004; Greenberg & Feinberg, 2005), there is a small but growing body of research (Gambone, Klem, and Connell, 2002) which provides compelling evidence that when communities nurture youth through supportive relationships with adults and peers, provide challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences, and develop meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership, communities can expect to see dramatic improvements in developmental outcomes in late adolescence and early adulthood.

The findings after five years of ACT for Youth serve to endorse the promise of youth development strategies for creating long-term change. The ACT for Youth initiative established a solid baseline of optimism and positive change for community-level youth development, which will ultimately improve healthy outcomes for young people and their communities in New York State. ●

ACT FOR YOUTH REGIONAL CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE

Background

An overarching goal of the ACT for Youth initiative, as stated in the original ACT request for proposals issued in 1998, was to create a statewide structure for assuring comprehensive, informed, and effective strategies to build developmental assets and prevent risk behaviors in young people. The Community Development Partnerships along with two Regional Centers of Excellence (Centers) were the foundation of this state-wide structure.

The Centers were expected to conduct the following activities:

- Develop and sustain relationships with the CDPs.
- Provide training and technical assistance to the CDPs and other youth-serving organizations on such topics as program and community development, evaluation, and collaboration.
- Provide training and technical assistance to youth-serving organizations on implementing youth development strategies in their prevention programs.
- Create clearinghouses of youth development-related resources and materials.
- Facilitate research on youth development and prevention topics.
- Evaluate the impact of the CDPs in their communities and the impact of the ACT initiative.
- Assist the Department of Health in furthering its agenda for young people and families.

Organizations awarded funding to establish Centers of Excellence were expected to possess the following attributes:

- Knowledge and expertise related to youth and family issues.
- Expertise in the integration of social/behavioral science and prevention interventions.
- Expertise in community development, strategic planning, and outcome evaluation.
- Ability to facilitate and support collaborations among youth-serving programs and community stakeholders.
- Ability to provide training and technical assistance on all related topics.

Two organizations were awarded funding to function as ACT for Youth Regional Centers of Excellence. Mount Sinai School of Medicine/Adolescent Health Center was designated the Downstate Center of Excellence and was primarily assigned to work with the CDPs in Brooklyn, Bronx, Yonkers, Greene County, and Columbia County. Cornell University's Family Life Development Center, in conjunction with the University of Rochester Division of Adolescent Medicine and the New York State Center for School Safety, was designated the Upstate Center of Excellence and was assigned to work primarily with the CDPs in the Capital District, Otsego County, Onondaga County, Jefferson County, Cattaraugus County, and Erie County.

While the Centers' core responsibilities and activities as stated in the request for applications were retained throughout the initiative, the Centers' role and influence expanded from their original conception. The Centers' activities are described below and conclude with a list of key elements of a successful Center of Excellence.

Develop and Sustain Relationships with Community Development Partnerships

An essential element of the ACT initiative was the success of the CDPs in bringing about changes regarding how young people are viewed and involved in their communities. A major function of the Centers was to assist the CDPs in achieving their objectives for community change.

Initially, it was important for the Centers to establish relationships with the staff of the agencies leading the CDPs, as well as with the members of the partnering agencies and institutions. These relationships were developed through several means including introductory phone calls, face-to-face meetings with each CDP membership, on-site training designed to respond to CDP-specific needs, and the distribution of materials in response to requests for information on a variety of topics.

During the initial phase of ACT for Youth, the Centers worked exclusively with their assigned CDPs. This arrangement helped foster the development of relationships between the Centers and their respective CDPs. However, over time it became apparent that maintaining strict limitations regarding CDP assignments meant that the CDPs were not fully benefiting from each Center's particular expertise and resources. As the initiative progressed, the Centers had the opportunity to work with all the CDPs; this allowed the CDPs to take advantage of each Center's particular strengths and areas of expertise. But the original regional assignment of the Centers to work with specific CDPs was never completely erased.

The regional assignment of CDPs to Centers was an effective method for achieving the goal of developing and sustaining relationships among the entities, but it also created several challenges. The primary challenge was the lack of consistency in a

number of areas during the CDP development stage. This lack of consistency was manifested in such areas as differences in the community and youth development language used by the two Centers, differences in the approaches the Centers employed to train CDPs on conducting local evaluation, unequal distribution of training workshops (e.g. topics and resources), and a general perception that the ACT initiative was not progressing in a structured and methodical way.

At the end of the first year of ACT, the CDP coordinators reported having positive relationships with the staff from their respective Centers, however there still was evidence that more needed to be done to structure the initiative and the interaction among all the ACT participants. The identification of the CDPs' core outcomes coupled with a series of visits to all the CDPs by teams of DOH staff and staff from each Center assisted in bringing a single purpose and identity to ACT.

Provide Training and Technical Assistance

The training and technical assistance function of the Centers of Excellence was one of the most successful outcomes of the ACT for Youth Initiative. Simply stated, the Centers' capacity to provide training on youth development and related topics, was created, expanded, and strengthened through the ACT initiative. The content and breadth of the training provided by the Centers evolved as the initiative progressed. In addition, the Centers developed a deeper understanding of the types of training that would further the goals of the CDPs, as well as the goals of youth-serving programs.

During the initial phase of ACT, the Centers focused their training and technical assistance services on the needs of the CDPs. Members of the CDPs were provided with training on such topics as

community organizing and development, logic modeling, and evaluation strategies and techniques. The Centers were also very responsive to CDP requests for training on specific, locally-identified topics. As ACT progressed, the Centers expanded the range of training topics offered to the CDP memberships to meet emerging and identified needs. For instance, when it became apparent that some CDPs were experiencing difficulty attracting schools into their partnerships, a workshop on approaching and working with school personnel was developed and delivered.

CDPs' concentrated efforts to achieve the core outcomes of the ACT initiative led to the development of even more training workshops. For example, workshops on fostering youth involvement and creation of meaningful roles for young people, assessing organizational readiness for youth development, youth-led evaluation, and reaching out to the business community were developed to address the more sophisticated training needs of the CDPs.

Based on annual surveys of the CDP lead agencies and the review of CDP quarterly program reports, it was evident that the Centers responded to training needs that assisted the CDPs in achieving their goals. Additionally, the CDP members reported that their requests for technical assistance on a wide range of topics were met by the Centers.

One of the most significant positive impacts of the Centers was the development and delivery of training and technical assistance to youth-serving organizations. During the ACT initiative, the Centers honed their expertise in developing and delivering training to staff of youth-serving organizations for the purpose of integrating youth development principles and practices into prevention programming. This expertise was garnered through the Centers' work with CDP member agencies and with Department of Health-

funded youth-serving provider groups (i.e. pregnancy prevention, abstinence, HIV prevention, and school-based health centers). The impact of this can best be demonstrated by the prevention programming being offered by the DOH-funded provider groups. The Centers delivered training to each separate provider community during DOH-sponsored provider meetings, and to all the provider groups through regional and statewide workshops. Through the Centers' training efforts, in conjunction with DOH contract requirements, the DOH-funded youth-serving agencies developed and implemented specific strategies for working with their program participants in a strength-based, youth development framework. This change from a deficit to a strength-based approach was demonstrated by such indicators as: 1) increased involvement of young people in decision-making roles in the programs, 2) new client assessment procedures that gather information about young people's strengths and interests, and 3) newly developed activities that allow young people to explore and master new skills and competencies.

Create Clearinghouses

Both Centers of Excellence successfully created clearinghouses of youth development and related materials. Both Centers created websites and electronic listservs in order to foster awareness about ACT and youth development and respond to requests for materials and information.

Recently there has been an explosion in the type and sheer amount of youth development materials available on the internet and elsewhere. Even among this abundance of resources, the Centers were successful in creating websites that were specifically relevant to New York State communities, as well as to people nationally and internationally. The websites contain information about, or links to, all the major sources of

youth development materials, as well as access to ACT specific materials created by the Centers.

Another highly successful aspect of the Centers of Excellence during the first phase of ACT was the development and dissemination of new youth development-related materials. The Centers were particularly adept at translating their experiences with the CDPs and the DOH-funded provider groups into practical, user-friendly resource materials. The Centers made major contributions to the goal of integrating youth development principles into prevention programming through Center-developed materials. Regular newsletters focusing on best practices for youth service practitioners, fact sheets exploring a range of issues affecting young people, and a comprehensive resource manual all enhanced programs' capacity to work with young people from a strength-based perspective.

Facilitate Research

Opportunities for the Centers to facilitate and conduct research on youth development and prevention topics during the initial phase of ACT were limited. The goal of facilitating research may not have been achievable during the initial phase of ACT given the many priorities intrinsic to the start of a new, and materially different, initiative. However, the Centers did launch several youth development research projects (supported with other funding) during the initial phase of ACT. The ACT initiative afforded the Centers an additional context for examining important research questions, as well as another platform for disseminating information about and results from the research. Some examples of the research projects undertaken by the Centers include:

- Mapping Youth Development Activity in New York State – to assess the extent and

nature of youth development activities implemented across the state and document statewide patterns on the barriers and successes communities experienced.

- Buffalo and Erie County School Connectedness Project – to assess and improve school environments to enhance student connectedness and safety.
- Capacity Building with Community-based Youth Workers – to examine an approach to increase the skills and roles of young people working in a community-based program setting.
- Engaging Youth as Research Partners – to develop an approach to engage young people as research partners that enhances youth voice and participation.
- Including Adolescents in Their Own Health and Mental Health Care – to describe the integration of youth development principles and practices into a health clinic for at-risk youth.
- Giving Voice to Clients of Mental Health Services – to describe how empirical data gathered in an urban mental health program resulted in organizational changes through a recommitment to youth development within the mental health setting.
- Preventing Self-Injurious Behavior During Adolescence – to examine the rise in self-injurious behavior during adolescence and develop strategies to prevent its occurrence.

Based on work with CDPs, the work with the DOH-funded youth-serving programs, and the participation on the New York State Youth Development Team, the Centers were well positioned to identify and undertake viable research projects. For instance, the Centers played an essential role as members of the New York State Youth Development team in identifying a set of performance indicators used to measure youth development outcomes.

The need to validate the effectiveness of the youth development approach to preventing or reducing negative risk taking behaviors among teens is recognized as an essential element of the ACT initiative. It is anticipated that such research will be initiated in the next cycle of ACT as the Center of Excellence makes concerted efforts to leverage additional funding to examine these important questions.

Evaluate the Impact of the ACT Initiative

A major task of the Centers of Excellence was to assess the success of the CDPs in achieving their core outcomes. The bulk of this final report illustrated the Centers' findings regarding the CDPs accomplishments and the lessons learned through the first phase of ACT.

The Centers dedicated many resources to evaluating the CDPs and to assessing the overall impact of the ACT initiative on furthering the youth development movement in New York State. The Centers conducted a thorough review of the CDPs activities, successes, and challenges and identified important lessons that will inform the next ACT funding cycle. In addition to identifying strategies for improving the community development component of ACT, the Centers' evaluation activities produced valuable lessons concerning the methodologies to use and the performance indicators needed to measure the success of the ACT for Youth approach to promoting youth development in New York State.

Assist the Department of Health

The use of a Center of Excellence to support DOH public health efforts was a new concept when it was introduced in the ACT for Youth Request for Applications released in 1998. In addition to structuring the Centers' roles and responsibilities in the initiative, attention also needed to be directed

toward establishing productive working relationships between the Centers and DOH (as well as between the two Centers). These relationships developed over time and were fostered through regular contact with the representatives of the Centers. Staff from DOH and the Centers also periodically met for two-day meetings, during which the goals and activities of ACT were discussed in detail and decisions concerning the direction of the initiative were mutually determined.

The Centers made significant contributions in assisting the Department of Health define and further its agenda for young people. Those contributions are evidenced in the increased recognition that the principles of youth development receive in communities across New York State, in the change from deficit-based to strength-based approaches and practices in the DOH-funded youth serving programs around the State, and in the national recognition New York State receives for being a leader in the implementation of youth development principles and practices. The Centers, and individual Center staff members, were very successful in promoting the ACT initiative and highlighting the Department's role in youth development through their many professional affiliations and relationships with other experts in the field. Center staff presented at national conferences, participated in regional and state symposia, and collaborated with other national leaders in youth development. As a result of these associations and activities, the Department of Health received greater recognition as a leader in promoting the integration of youth development principles into health initiatives.

As members of the New York State Youth Development Team, the Centers played a vital role furthering the DOH agenda, as well as the entire State's agenda for young people and families. Youth Development Team members expressed the opinion that

the Centers brought legitimacy to the application of research and to the definition and development of youth development principles and practices. The Centers were perceived as integral members of the Team, deeply involved in Team activities and in setting the Team's direction. Some Team members expressed the desire for the Centers to take on a larger role by providing support to other New York State agencies.

The initial phase of ACT gave an indication of the value the Centers bring to the Department of Health. The relationship with the Centers helped DOH to more thoroughly make the transition to a strength-based approach to working with young people. That transition is happening not only in the DOH-funded youth programs, but also in how DOH staff members perceive all health-related programs for young people. It is anticipated that the foundation built in the initial years of ACT will result in even greater progress in promoting a youth development agenda throughout all communities and service sectors in New York State.

Key Elements of Successful Center of Excellence

The initial phase of any new initiative is a time for encountering challenges and identifying strategies and activities to improve program performance. Several valuable lessons were learned during the first phase of ACT for Youth about the function and operation of a Center of Excellence. These lessons helped to identify the following key elements of an effective Center of Excellence.

Structure

A successful Center of Excellence creates a division of labor among staff who are assigned clearly delineated roles and responsibilities. Given the many and varied functions and goals of a Center, it is

imperative that staff are given specific tasks and areas of responsibility. For instance, a staff person must be identified as primarily responsible for working with and responding to the needs of the community partnerships. This person should be the main point of contact for the community partnerships and be in a position to either directly address the community needs or access other resources to meet those needs. Additionally, a Center must employ staff with experience and expertise in training, technical assistance, community development, resource development, use of technology, evaluation, and research, as well as an in-depth knowledge of positive youth development. The linchpin position in a Center is a coordinator who ensures that all Center functions are fulfilled, and is expert at identifying the need for and leveraging other resources to meet emerging needs. The coordinator is the primary contact with Department of Health staff for ongoing and routine communication, as well as responding to issues as they may arise. Implied in the need for structure is the desire for a Center to decrease staff turnover to the greatest extent possible. As in any program, the coming and going of staff disrupts activities and progress toward meeting initiative goals. Consistent staff is particularly essential during the start-up and implementation of a unique initiative such as ACT for Youth.

Experience from the initial ACT initiative demonstrated the corresponding need to provide structure to the community partnership component of ACT. It is understood that clearly communicated expectations, along with planned common activities to be undertaken by all the community partnerships, will enhance the overall structure of the ACT initiative. While it is important to allow each community to respond to its local needs, it is equally important to the success of the ACT initiative to provide clear parameters for how the partnerships will work with a

Center of Excellence to achieve their goals. These parameters will also enable a Center of Excellence to assign staff and allocate resources in a planned and effective way.

Consistency

Coupled with the requirement for a clearly delineated Center structure is the need for a Center to deliver clear and consistent information and messages to the community partnerships. A critical element in this endeavor is for a Center to establish effective working relationships with the community partnerships. In this regard, it is imperative that each community partnership understands and experiences the expertise and assistance a Center can provide. It is incumbent upon a Center to be responsive to the needs of each community partnership without losing sight of the goals of the entire ACT initiative. Therefore, a Center must ensure that all the community partnerships are provided equal access to the Center's resources (e.g. training, technical assistance, etc.). It is equally important that the Center creates and uses a common language when communicating with the community partnerships. A clear understanding among all the ACT programs about the definition and the principles of youth development, data collection requirements, evaluation strategies, community development approaches, and strategies for achieving the community partnerships' core outcomes is key to the ACT initiative's overall success.

Comprehensiveness

A Center of Excellence must possess a core set of capacities and skills to fulfill its primary functions. In addition, given the breadth of the responsibilities of a Center and the wide-ranging issues that potentially may need to be addressed, a successful Center must also be in a position to leverage an untold number of other resources and expertise. This ability to leverage other

assistance is enhanced by the internal resources available within the institution that houses a Center of Excellence, as well as the professional and personal relationships a Center's staff members have with other institutions and individuals. Experience from the first phase of ACT illustrated the importance of possessing the ability to identify and access additional complementary resources in order to respond to emerging issues. For instance, the Centers of Excellence were able to secure noted experts in the fields of youth development, community development, evaluation, research, adolescent development, youth voice, and a variety of health and prevention services for young people, to present at statewide conferences, symposia, and regional meetings. The ability of the Centers to enlist the assistance of colleagues from within their larger institutions, and through other connections, greatly enhanced and expanded the reach and depth of the ACT initiative. The value of these additional resources cannot be overstated.

Vision

The youth development movement generated a great deal of attention and momentum in New York State and nationally since the beginning of the ACT for Youth initiative. There is an ever-increasing body of research, program experience, policies, and perspectives about youth development that is accumulating at a rapid pace. An effective Center must have the ability to keep abreast of all the developments and view them with a critical eye. A successful Center (and its staff) must have the vision to anticipate the future direction of the youth development movement and place New York State in a position to respond to changing environments and emerging needs. This vision requires a Center to be aware, and have an understanding, of what is occurring in many arenas including local community values, statewide and national policies, research frontiers, youth culture,

and best practices for service delivery. A Center must also be responsive to many, sometimes competing, demands from multiple sources including the community partnerships, youth-serving agencies, and State and private agencies. And ultimately a Center is responsible to the funding agency – the Department of Health. Therefore, a successful Center must possess the experience and the vision to look at all developments and issues from the perspective of how they advance the goals of the ACT for Youth initiative.

Leadership

The ACT for Youth Centers of Excellence played an increasingly visible role in New York State as the ACT for Youth initiative progressed. In many ways, the Centers became the “face” of ACT. The title “Center of Excellence” created a level of expectation that the Centers increasingly met as ACT progressed. A successful Center of Excellence must embrace the title and assume an active leadership role in promoting positive youth development in New York State. A Center must constantly review and assess its operations and services to ensure that it is, in fact, providing leadership in advancing the goals of ACT for Youth.

A Center can demonstrate leadership in numerous ways. Leadership is exhibited by the Center staff, who demonstrate their knowledge and expertise in the multiple facets encompassed in the ACT initiative. A Center’s ability to collect and effectively disseminate up-to-date resources on all aspects of youth development and related topics is another demonstration of effective leadership. Identifying emerging and cutting-edge issues and bringing together outside resources and experts to address those issues is another aspect of leadership.

A Center’s leadership in promoting positive youth development must also take place in several venues and for different audiences. At the community level, a Center must be

able to demonstrate to the partnerships and their participating members its ability to help them achieve their goals. At the state level, a Center’s leadership ability must be exhibited through its membership and active participation on the NYS Youth Development Team, for example. Nationally, a Center can take a leadership role in researching and documenting the positive impact youth development has on young people, their families and their communities. Finally, a Center is expected to take a leadership role in helping the Department of Health accomplish its goal of infusing a strength-based approach in all its funded youth-serving programs.

There are many opportunities for a Center of Excellence to be a leader in the youth development movement. A Center must consciously and consistently bring together all its strengths and assets (staff, institution, relationships, technology, knowledge, expertise, etc.) to ensure that they enable and support the Center to assume and maintain a leadership role.

Conclusion

The ACT for Youth initiative is one component of the Department of Health’s investment in New York State’s young people and families. ACT for Youth is evidence of the Department’s commitment to incorporating the principles of positive youth development into its public health agenda. A critical component in this endeavor is the concept and reality of a Center of Excellence. The first phase of the ACT for Youth initiative demonstrated the value and the potential of a Center of Excellence for youth development. Building on the experiences to date and the recognition of the key elements of a successful Center of Excellence, it is anticipated that a Center will play even a greater role in furthering the positive youth development movement in the next ACT for Youth funding cycle.

Next Steps

As conceived in the original ACT for Youth request for applications, there would be two regional Centers of Excellence. Since the primary goal and function of the Centers would be to support the Community Development Partnerships in achieving their goals, it was thought that having two Centers (one working with CDPs located downstate and one working with CDPs located upstate) would best accomplish this goal. However, as the initiative progressed it became apparent that, in some respects, the existence of two Centers hindered the initiative.

The presence of two Centers of Excellence made it difficult to create and maintain a consistent message to all the parties involved in the ACT initiative. The presence of two Centers worked against achieving the goal of creating a true statewide presence and the equal distribution of resources throughout the state. In some respects, the realization of a “critical mass” of youth development resources and expertise was dissipated through the existence of two Centers. Unavoidable duplication of services was another by-product of having two Centers. In addition, the presence of two Centers of Excellence required a more complex system for Department of Health staff to manage and oversee the contracts with the Centers.

Given the above considerations, the Department of Health decided to support one statewide Center of Excellence in the second ACT funding cycle. As described in the Department’s request for applications, the second cycle Center of Excellence is required to maintain a state-wide presence and serve the entire state. In addition, in recognition of the Department’s goal of integrating youth development principles and practices into its youth-serving programs and building on the work started during the initial phase of ACT, the role, responsibilities, and activities of the Center

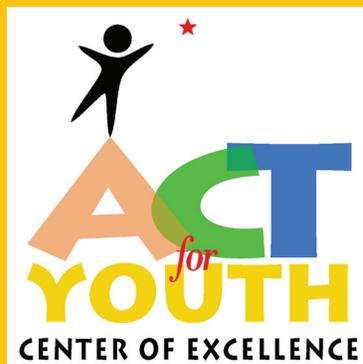
of Excellence would be expanded. This expanded mission is reflected in the revised name of the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence – namely, the Center of Excellence for the Integration of Youth Development and Adolescent Programs. ●

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