

FOCUS on Michigan's Communities

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Oakland County Youth Assistance Program *A National Model That Works to Prevent Delinquency, Abuse and Neglect*

Oakland County Youth Assistance (YA) was begun in Hazel Park, Michigan in 1953. Over the next 20 years, it spread throughout the county and now represents 26 local affiliates, each corresponding to a local school district boundary. The YA Mission is:

“To strengthen youth and families and reduce the incidence of delinquency, abuse and neglect through citizen involvement.”

The Oakland County Youth Assistance program includes many unique features. One important feature, and the key to the stability of the YA program over time, is its tri-sponsorship. The courts, specifically the Probate and Circuit Court are one sponsoring group. The local school districts represent the second group of partners, and the municipalities (cities, villages and townships) are the third. Each local YA program is co-sponsored by the courts, the school district it encompasses and the municipalities therein. In all, over 80 branches of government and school districts sponsor and support YA in Oakland County. As a co-sponsor, each makes a financial commitment.

Casework Services

YA provides direct, family-focused, free, confidential, accessible, and timely casework services to youth and families in the community. The Courts provide the staffing, and the other local sponsors provide the office, and necessary clerical support.

Referrals: Referrals to the program come primarily from the police (55%), the schools (33%) and parents themselves (10%). Any youth from 0-17 years of age who lives or goes to school in Oakland County can be referred for services. There are a few offenses that by law are considered to be non-divertable, e.g., murder, and criminal sexual conduct and can therefore not be referred to YA, but referrals are made for committing other offenses. Referrals can also be for situations where no illegal act has occurred but where changes in a child's attitude or behavior are noted.

that does not focus on the particular incident but on the needs and strengths of all members of the family. Based on the assessment, a treatment plan for the family is developed that may contain specific actions for the parents, each sibling as well as the referred youth. Sometimes the family or individual members of the family are referred out to other community resources for services. There are no preset time limits, or number of visits. Typically, services last 3-6 months.

Each year over 3,000 referrals are received. About 60% of those referred are males, and the average age is about 13.5. Typical reasons for referral include retail fraud (shoplifting), truancy, incorrigibility, assault, larceny, destruction of property, alcohol, tobacco or other drug violations, curfew, arson, etc. Again, some youth are referred who have violated no laws but there is a concern noted by parents, school personnel or the police.

Services: In each case, a family-assessment is conducted,



An independent, statewide child advocacy organization that acts as a voice for children

Community Organization

Activities: The community organization function of the YA program also contains a number of unique elements. In each local YA area, individuals who live and/or work in the community form a working "Board of Directors." In some communities this "Board" is made up of less than a dozen individuals. In other areas, as many as 50 people serve on the "Board" or its subcommittees. These volunteer citizens are involved in leadership roles, including identifying issues in their community that contribute to delinquency, abuse and neglect. They must then identify existing community resources that may already be or potentially could be addressing these identified issues. Finally, they develop/adopt programs to meet unmet needs. All of this is often done with others in the community who have similar missions and interests including schools, service clubs, e.g., Optimists, Rotary, etc., the faith community, businesses, Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brother/Big Sister, municipal Parks and Recreation Departments, libraries, etc.

Annually, over 1,000 volunteers participate in some capacity, including fundraising.

Typically, 30-35,000 youth and adults annually participate in programs offered at least in part by YA through the community organization component. These include participating in parenting classes, those provided camp and skill-building scholarships, one-to-one mentors, shoplifting prevention education, recreation program, teen centers, youth recognition, etc.

Evaluation

Independent contractors conducted three-year studies to determine the effectiveness of both the casework services and participation in community-based programs in "strengthening families and reducing the incidence of delinquency, abuse and neglect." Both studies found that after three years, over 92% of the families receiving casework services AND over 92% of the families served by the community-based programs had no additional court involvement. When "success" is often measured in months, the three-year follow-up is highly significant.

Program Support

YA program support comes in many forms including actual cash, and many kinds of in-kind support. Annually, volunteers generate over \$250,000 by fund raising, and local communities and school districts provide in excess of \$850,000. The Courts contribution of staffing is about \$3,000,000. Our volunteers contribute 35-40,000 hours. Because basic operational needs are provided by our local sponsors, any money donated or grants received can go directly to providing services. There are no "indirect" or "administrative" costs. This makes it easier and more appealing for funding sources because they know every penny they provide goes directly to help youth and families.

Youth Assistance has worked in rural, suburban and urban areas of the county. It is highly cost effective. For the cost of housing one youth in the "youth home" for a year, a full-time caseworker can be provided who can serve over 100 families.

National Recognition

Youth Assistance has been the recipient of many national awards including,

- American Correctional Association's "Outstanding Program of the Year" award (1999)
- National "Vision Award" in the "National Education" category for the development of a video and classroom presentation in partnership with Target (1998)
- The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges has honored Youth Assistance seven times since 1981.

For additional information about the Oakland County Youth Assistance program, please contact:

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