

YOUTH INITIATIVE PROJECT (YIP)

Bid 15109

In 1991, a 15-year old junior high school student who was being served by a New Futures case manager became a victim of homicide. To prevent retaliatory violence, the case manager gathered together the friends of the young man who had been shot and guided them through a weekend of positive activities and group discussions. The idea worked, and the young men continued to meet as a group to discuss the personal, economic and social factors that increase the risk of negative, maybe even unhealthy behavior. The Youth Initiative Project was created with this group of young men.

The ***Youth Initiative Project*** (YIP) received its initial sanction and support from the Board of Directors of New Futures for Little Rock Youth. This nonprofit organization, located in downtown Little Rock, became the base of the operation. The 21 participants of this pilot group were all black males. By 1992 and 1993, the YIP model was adopted as a programmatic component for Operation Safe Summer (OSS). OSS, an annual project of the Little Rock Task Force for Youth, was a multifaceted effort to prevent violence during the crucial months that youth are out of school.

The success of the YIP sites can be attributed to the user-friendly design of the model, but also to the fact that the program's presence can have an impact on the surrounding community and public policy.

The three-tiered structure (or phases) is based on the same components that gangs use: ***Recruitment***, ***Enrichment*** and ***Empowerment***. The target age range for Youth Initiative Project (YIP) participants is 13 through 19 years old, although the program occasionally serves youth younger than 13 and older than 19 who fit the program's profile.

The recruitment phase purposefully mirrors the method used by youth gangs to fill the need for acceptance, fellowship and protection. Intensive recruitment methods should include peer recruitment, linkages with the juvenile system, LRPD, going out into the community and talking with young people on the streets, in schools, or in their homes.

The initial engagement or recruitment process should begin with a one-on-one assessment, gathering information such as educational history, family history, social service needs, legal history and other pertinent information. The site coordinator must have the ability to understand and empathize with youth and the challenges they face; e.g., expulsion from school, conflict with family members, poverty or isolation from mainstream society.

The use of traditional, cultural, athletic, and other recreational activities are effective tools for recruitment, to attract, keep youth engaged as well as build group cohesion. These activities are mainstays of the program during the recruitment phase.

The behavior and skills initially possessed by these youth, often developed as a response to extremely adverse social and economic conditions, cause them to be labeled as problem youth or troublemakers. As such, they are often excluded from school, youth centers and other traditional

programs. ***The Enrichment phase*** focuses on promoting the development of social skills, which enable young people to function in, be successful in, and contribute to mainstream society.

Throughout the Enrichment phase, youth should be challenged to identify inappropriate behavior. Positive activities must be offered as alternatives to negative activities associated with gangs, and used to teach and practice acceptable behavior, and build self-reliance as they become aware of their ability to function positively in a variety of social situations.

The advanced stage of this phase should incorporate seminars, workshops, retreats, etc. as a method of teaching violence prevention through conflict resolution and drug abuse education.

In the Enrichment phase, as in each phase of the YIP emphasis should be placed on school improvement, both academically and behaviorally, regular attendance, regular study periods, tutoring, and fundamentals of positive peer pressure as a motivation for individual growth and learning. To strengthen this component, providers should include off-site activities; e.g., library visits, attending lectures, and other educational and cultural activities. Because funds are limited, linkages and collaborations utilizing volunteers, teachers/professional instructors, participation of community members, other youth-service professionals, and community organizations is critical to enhance your ability to offer some needed services.

The use of group discussions, group dynamics build strong communication skills, offer useful information, and emphasize positive values among group members. Topics should include conflict resolution, violence prevention and drug/alcohol abuse, as well as a more diverse range of concerns, such as social development, male/female responsibility, sexually transmitted disease, economic empowerment, racism, and academic achievement.

Intensive case management is a critical piece in the YIP component, through which site coordinators deliberately and constructively become involved in the lives of the participants. Providing 24-hour access to supportive adult interaction assist in replacing the gang as the youth's support system. The case management element includes direct intervention by coordinators and referrals to agencies for services not provided by the YIP.

The role modeling offered by the site coordinators and other adults are a part of both the Enrichment and Empowerment phases. Periodic contact with successful adults helps build healthy relationships between the YIP participants and the world around them.

The final phase of the program, ***Empowerment***, focuses on personal accountability and a new awareness of self in relationship to a career path. It solidifies a youth's connection with mainstream society by linking him or her to educational and economic institutions and opportunities. The YIP component offers assistance to youth in obtaining steady employment, education, vocational training, and emphasize the importance of being a constructive and contributing society member; as well as highlights the benefits of reinvestment in the community and entrepreneurship.