Little Rock's Youth Career Development System
A Summary Description
January 2005

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Work is a necessary force driving any successful community. The ability to work productively is crucial to the well being of each individual making up a community. Employment provides the basic necessities of life—food, shelter—and is a core component of positive self-concept, self-confidence and self-reliance. Far too many young people in Little Rock lack the opportunity to engage effectively in this critical activity. When they reach the age to enter the full time work world, numerous youth in Little Rock are missing the skills required to acquire and keep a job that provides a living wage and has growth potential.

When asked, employers in Little Rock consistently report that young people need, and often lack, basic reading, writing, and math skills coupled with "soft skills"—work values—like initiative, honesty, punctuality, reliability and customer service. With this skill set in place, employers can teach and train the job-specific content necessary for success in a variety of career areas available in our community.

What follows describes a career development system that gives young people experiences to gain and enhance the skills related to success in the work world. This system is community-wide—it requires contributions from an array of community partners—and is a graduated sequence of opportunities appropriate for the age and experience of the youth involved. It recognizes that the development of core educational skills and work values must begin well before the age of 16 or 17 when many people have their initial job experience for a wage. The career development system engages young people in early adolescence and continually provides experiences that connect education and positive work values to job success. The series of components of the

system extends from middle school through high school and into post-secondary career preparation. These components are also designed to involve young people at greatest risk of missing traditional opportunities to develop employability skills. The career development system focuses on youth from low-income neighborhoods where unemployment is high and job opportunities are few. It also reaches out to those teens struggling in school to develop the basic skills required to succeed in the workplace. The Career Development System intentionally targets youth who do not meet the eligibility criteria of the Workforce Investment Act. In the sections below the specific program components of the career development system are outlined in more detail.

Core Components

Job Shadowing. The career development system begins by providing young people the chance to see the workplace in action through job shadowing. This core component serves as a first attempt to show 11 or 12 year-olds the nature of jobs and careers that interest them. Job shadowing programs focus on displaying to young participants the importance of basic skills—reading, writing, math—as well as work values in the careers that interest them.

Partners in job shadowing include community employers, the school district, and community organizations. The Little Rock School District has successfully implemented a job shadowing effort, Vital Links. This initiative will be supported by additional job shadowing opportunities coordinated for youth participants in various community-based organizations like the City's neighborhood-based prevention programs.

Volunteer Community Contribution. As youth move into the early teen years, opportunities for self-sufficiency become increasingly important. Chances to lead, to

plan, and to do for themselves are motivating to youth and critical to positive development of the skills required to succeed in the job world. Although work could provide such opportunities, liability issues limit the availability of jobs for this age group as does the developmentally typical lack of maturity of 13 and 14 year-olds.

The career development system includes an effective alternative to work opportunities by including a volunteer community service/contribution component. Through partnerships with community-based organizations, faith groups, and other community institutions, service projects and activities will be designed, planned and implemented by young people with the support and supervision of adult mentors who are volunteers or staff of community-based organizations. These volunteer initiatives will focus on the importance the "soft skills" punctuality, teamwork, reliability, and follow-through.

Project-based Learning. The first component of the career development system that provides participants a chance to work for a wage is *Summer Transitions* project-based learning. Teams of 14 and 15 year-olds work with a teacher-leader during the summer to complete a project requiring science or math skills for success. Projects include building pool tables for community organizations—a mathematics-based project—and soil analysis of landscaping areas around a community organization to build science skills. A key purpose of the *Summer Transitions* model is helping teens experience the connection between academic skills and a variety of career paths.

Participants are paid for their hours of work on the project and produce useful products for the community organizations sponsoring the project teams. Partners in the project-based learning component include community-based organizations to provide

coordination and a project site, and the school district to develop effective project curricula supporting the math and science benchmarks for 14 and 15 year-olds.

Summer Employment. The centerpiece of Little Rock's career development system is the *Summer Jobs Alliance.* For more than a decade, coordinated by New Futures for Youth and supported by resources of the City of Little Rock, the *Summer Jobs Alliance* has provided real work opportunities for Little Rock youth. In City government and state agencies, and through key partnerships with members of the Regional Chamber of Commerce, employment has been provided to thousands of young people. The summer employment program includes annual employability skills training for all participants and outreach to youth living in areas of Little Rock where high unemployment rates for adults make employment opportunities for teens especially difficult to obtain. The *Alliance* also provides mentors for teen employees through community-based organizations. These individuals serve as intermediaries to improve learning and ensure a positive experience for employers and employees.

Each year the number of teens who apply to participate in the *Summer Jobs Alliance* greatly outnumbers the available work opportunities. For the summer of 2003, the City of Little Rock's Children, Youth and Families Commission provided funding for 200 summer youth employees. The success of that summer and demand for additional opportunities resulted in an increase in support from the CYF Commission to 300 jobs during summer 2004. Even with this substantial growth, additional opportunities are needed. In the summer of 2004 more than 300 youth who applied did not have job opportunities. In the late 1990's a number of these missing opportunities were provided by private businesses that participated in the *Summer Jobs Alliance* through the Regional

Chamber of Commerce. Chamber partners made commitments to retain employees for multiple summers and provided internships for participants who were attending college. With the economic downturn in 2000 through 2002, the number of jobs provided by private businesses dwindled dramatically. A recommitment of the Chamber members is needed for future summers to ensure continued strength of this centerpiece of Little Rock's Career Development System.

Internships. Although the jobs provided through the *Summer Jobs Alliance* are varied and range from indoor deskwork to outdoor landscaping, the career development system includes an internship component for more experienced youth. Internships are designed for participants who have completed at least one successful year in the *Summer Jobs Alliance* and are at least 17 years old. This component allows a participant to engage in exploration of a particular career of interest over the course of a summer and to begin building a relationship with an employer in field of choice.

Apprenticeships. High school graduation is a major transition point in the lives of all youth. Post-secondary education and career preparation is crucial to movement by young people into quality work with room for growth. For many youth this preparation occurs at a two or four year college or technical school. As a alternative route to continuing preparation, the career development system includes apprenticeships. Partnering with employers and labor unions, the career development system will connect 18 to 24 year old youth with apprenticeship opportunities in a variety of areas.

Entrepreneurial Training. Young people often possess phenomenal levels of creativity. This component of the career development system will help participants who are out of high school acquire the skills and abilities to turn creative ideas into successful

companies. Participants complete a training course and curriculum for small business start-up and will be connected to community partners and agencies that incubate small businesses.

Employment for Out-of-School Youth. The 2000 U.S. Census counts more than 1,000 people in Little Rock who are 16 to 19 years old, out of school and unemployed. This large number of disconnected youth have few chances to reattach themselves to the stabilizing opportunities that lead to successful employment. The career development system focuses outreach efforts toward these high risk, underserved individuals. Through partnerships with community-based organizations, the career development system will re-engage these youth and link them with opportunities to earn GED's, connect with additional educational opportunities and participate in other parts of the career development system appropriate to their circumstances.

Information System

Complementing the core program components described previously, an information system will track the participants, partners, and activities of Little Rock's career development system. Participants will be tracked across their activity within the system. Regardless of their point of entry, basic demographic information will be collected for the participants and subsequent movement into other components of the system will be documented. Interest and skills assessments will also become a part of each young person's career portfolio. Through this integration of information, the variety of experiences for individual youth can be assessed as can be the success of the system to engage youth and move them through a series of skill-developing programs and opportunities.

In addition to participant tracking, the system will document employer and partner participation. The jobs and resources provided by employers will be recorded including detailed job descriptions of the opportunities provided by employers. The specific roles completed by partnering organizations will also be documented in the information system as will activities completed by youth in the core components of the career development system.

Youth Employability Policy Team

The Career Development System consists of multiple program components, partnerships among numerous agencies, institutions and organizations, and hundreds of youth participants. The Youth Employability Policy Team is the collaborative structure designed to coordinate the various components, assess the system's effectiveness, and advocate for the resources, policies, and relationships required to assure the Career System's ongoing success.

The Policy Team functions to establish the sequence of services needed to help young people move toward employability over time. It accomplishes this function through joint planning, community-level action, and policy development. The Policy Team sets goals for the career development system, regularly reviews progress toward those goals, and recommends changes to the program components required to realize its youth employability vision. The Policy Team serves as common point of contact for the career system's partners as well as a point of contact with other workforce development entities like the Workforce Investment Board's Youth Council and policy-making bodies like the Little Rock Board of Directors and the Little Rock School Board.

Policy Team members include representatives from partners implementing various components of the system and those providing resources critical to the system's implementations. City and state government, the Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Little Rock School District, community organizations, faith groups, and media outlets are examples of organizations required by the Policy Team.