

# The Youth Partnership for Health

## Why Involve Youth? What's at Stake?

Ideas and input from youth are vital to the success of any program targeting youth. When programs targeting youth do not involve them in the development and decision-making process, they risk developing strategies that don't work and waste valuable resources.<sup>1</sup> Youth play important roles in all aspects of program development and implementation from program design to evaluation of effectiveness. In fact, the roles that young people play are as varied as the roles of adults. They are limited only by the willingness of participants to engage young voices in important issues. Research supports the value of youth involvement, not just for the youth, but for adults and organizations too.<sup>2</sup> The success of youth involvement efforts is widely recognized, so widely that there are worldwide efforts to engage youth as leaders in policy and program design and delivery.<sup>3</sup>

## Colorado's Youth Partnership for Health Program Description

The Youth Partnership for Health (YPH) serves as a youth advisory council to state, local and community stakeholders. This diverse council is made up of youth consultants between the ages of 13-19, selected for their unique experiences and their ability to utilize these experiences as a foundation from which they can provide open and honest feedback. Each month, YPH youth consultants provide recommendations, to most effectively create and/or influence policies, programming and practices focused on promoting the health and well-being of young people statewide. In partnership with adults, YPH aims to engage young people as advocates of their own health and well-being as well as the health and well-being of their peers and communities statewide.

Since 2000, the Youth Partnership for Health advisory council has provided feedback and recommendations to numerous programs and initiatives that have resulted in:

- Policy, program and practice changes
- Design of youth internship projects
- Creation of youth-friendly marketing and outreach materials
- An original DVD and guidebook on building effective youth-adult partnerships that has been distributed nationally
- Shaping state and national survey tool development and implementation, and
- Development of statewide plans aimed at improving youth sexual health.

Through bi-annual evaluation, adults who have partnered with YPH consultants report an overall improved ability to access and engage young people, as well as increase their programs' reach when seeking to impact youth health. As one partnering stakeholder concluded, "Before developing a plan of action and/ or a new program, I seek input from youth, e.g. YPH, to maximize its potential for success."

## Evidenced-Base for Involving Youth

Involving young people in program development and implementation can increase the potential for success. Research indicates that programs utilizing youth-adult partnerships often demonstrate greater effectiveness, and offer potential benefits to not only youth, but to the adults and organizations that serve them.<sup>2</sup> Adults who participate in these partnerships have said that they see youth as more competent and critical to program success. They have also reported feeling stronger and more competent themselves in relating to youth, and feeling a deeper connection to their communities.<sup>2</sup> Organizations that utilize youth-adult partnerships have realized greater mission clarity, increased connection and responsiveness to youth and the general community, and greater appeal to funders.

Research has also demonstrated that youth involved in program development experience decreased shyness and hopelessness and greater self-esteem, academic achievement, sense of personal safety, communication skills, and life skills (e.g. conflict resolution and problem solving).<sup>2</sup> Many of these characteristics have been linked to improvements in physical activity and nutrition, and declines in sexual activity and drug use (all of which are *Healthy People 2020* goals for youth).<sup>4,5</sup>

## Challenges and Future Opportunities

Involving young people in program development and implementation can present challenges (i.e. lack of resources, scheduling difficulties). However, the benefits reported by partnership participants are extensive, including greater understanding of the youth perspective, improvement in youth programming and increased sensitivity to diverse cultures. The YPH is available to provide input to any state program or initiative targeting youth. It also provides consultation and technical assistance in the development of youth-adult partnerships and youth advisory boards. For more details, please contact the Youth Partnership for Health Coordinator Lorin Scott-Okerblom at (303) 691-4073 or [lorin.scott-okkerblom@state.co.us](mailto:lorin.scott-okkerblom@state.co.us).

## State and Local Partnerships

The Youth Partnership for Health works with various state-level groups such as The Colorado Department of Transportation, The Colorado Office of Preparedness, The Colorado Department of Human Services, The Colorado Department of Education, Denver Health and Hospitals, the University of Colorado Denver Health Sciences Center and the University of Denver. In addition, the Youth Partnership for Health actively recruits and encourages participation from youth in urban, rural and frontier communities across Colorado.

## Website

For more information visit: <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/positive-youth-development>

1 Olson, J.R., Goddard, H.W., Solheim, C.A., Sandt, L. (2004). Making a case for engaging adolescents in program decision-making. *Journal of Extension*, 42(6), 1-10.

2 Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A.K., Toptzes, D. & Calvert, M. (2000). *Youth in Decision-Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth and Adults on Organizations*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

3 Kahn, R., Lynn, J., Braga, A., & Donovan, K. (2008). *Engage Youth: Colorado's Guide to Building Successful Youth-Adult Partnerships*. Denver, CO: Colorado Youth Partnership for Health, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

4 Nystrom, R. J., Prata, A., and Ramowski, S. (2007). *Measuring Youth Development: Creation and Analysis of Oregon's Positive Youth Development Benchmark*. Portland, OR: Oregon Adolescent Health Section, Public Health Division, Department of Human Services.

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *The Prevention Marketing Initiative: Youth Involvement*. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, 1997.

