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Youth Advocacy Development

A white paper written by youth leaders from the Youth Leadership Development Institute

2011

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Youth Leadership Development Institute

Introduction to the Youth Leadership Development Institute (YLDI)

The Youth Leadership Development Institute was established through support from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau's State Implementation Grant. This Institute worked to promote the development of advocacy and leadership skills in youth with disabilities. The developers of the curriculum believe in the importance of creating youth-led and youth-focused programs in order to develop a network of peer mentors. Youth who attended these events were between the ages of 16-28, had a disclosed disability, and were identified as emerging leaders.

Purpose of the YLDI

The goal of the YLDI is to provide a safe, accepting environment to cultivate the growth of self-acceptance, confidence, and self-advocacy skills. Youth leaving the YLDI program should feel more accepting of themselves with a disability; more confident in their abilities and choices; and more connected to fellow youth at YLDI and to the disability community as a whole.

Youth Leadership Development Institute White Papers

Introduction to the White Papers

In recognition of the limited amount of time they had together, the members of the YLDI decided that they wanted to leave a legacy of the work they had done as a group. There are a number of barriers that youth with disabilities commonly face, that, when unaddressed, can result in devastating consequences. In recognition of these issues, the group began developing a set of twelve white papers identifying the discrimination and barriers that youth endure.

Development of the White Papers

In November of 2009, the first YLDI was held in Cranberry, Pennsylvania. Approximately twenty youth with disabilities attended this event, and from that group eight youth were selected to take on leadership positions for future YLDI events. Over the next two years, three additional YLDI trainings were held, and from those three, twelve additional leaders were chosen to assist in creating training materials, leading sessions, speaking to officials about youth issues, and creating white papers. In the last year of the program, these twenty leaders attended advanced leadership institutes where they assisted in developing the twelve white papers.

During this two-year endeavor, the twenty leaders (ages 16-29) met on four different occasions to identify top issues faced by youth, define sources of the problems, and create recommendations. These four weekend meetings produced the foundation of each of the twelve white papers. Topics include:

- Employment
- Education
- Self-Advocacy
- Healthcare
- Independent Living
- Youth Leadership Development
- Social Relationships
- Disability Stigma
- Transition
- Transportation
- Top Issues: Summary of Concerns

Several members of the group volunteered to further develop these foundational documents into policy papers. Each paper was then edited by the other leaders. The resulting white papers are to be used to identify the barriers faced by youth and to recognize the importance of the youth voice in developing solutions.

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Barriers to Youth Advocacy Develop

Availability of Advocates

PROBLEM

Limited advocates- Currently, due to a lack of training and funding, there are a limited number of advocates available. This deficit prevents people with disabilities from making their needs known to policy makers and the general public, creating a further lack of awareness. It is often difficult for individuals with disabilities to locate disability advocacy groups. Existing groups are often diagnosis-specific, which limits the issues they can address and the populations they can serve.

RESOLUTIONS

To create more inclusive and cross-disability groups- These groups can help individuals advocate for their needs, provide peer support, locate services, and facilitate policy changes.

To involve professional and educational entities (e.g. educators, healthcare and legal providers) in disseminating information about advocacy and support services. This could be accomplished through referrals to information centers such as helpinpa.org, centers for independent living, vocational rehabilitation, Parent Youth Professional Forums, and parent information centers.

Opportunities for Youth

PROBLEM

Disempowering- Youth with disabilities often face the difficulty of having a double minority status. As a result, they are rarely respected as prospective key players in policy and procedure development. Even when youth are invited to serve in leadership positions, they are often seen as youth tokens, fulfilling diversity position on a board. This disempowers youth, preventing their needs from being addressed.

RESOLUTION

To develop a youth liaison with larger impact and presence- Youth must have a liaison and advocate who is able to support the needs of the youth

in meetings, represent their views to leadership, and work to empower their voices.

To provide youth with uninterrupted allotted timeslots to speak- During meetings and official events, youth may feel intimidated to voice their opinions or ask questions. Often it is easier and less intimidating for youth to have a designated time to present. This allows youth to share their opinions and empowers them to become more involved.

Self Advocacy

PROBLEM

Lack of basic skills necessary for advocacy- People with disabilities often lack self-understanding, self-acceptance and self-determination skills. These capacities are vital to an individual's awareness of his or her needs and ability to ask for necessary supports. Without the understanding and acceptance of one's disability, individuals may not be accepting of accommodation, limiting their ability to become successful adults and reach their maximum potential.

RESOLUTION

To promote positive family involvement via parent and family education centers- When young adult leaders are asked how they have become successful, they repeatedly report that family support was critical in their development. Unfortunately, families do not always have the necessary tools or skills to adequately support their children. Therefore, support and education for parents is often vital in the ultimate success of the youth.

To teach, practice, and encourage advocacy skills. Self-advocacy is not an innate ability, it must be taught- Youth need to be encouraged to talk about their disabilities and their accommodations in supportive environments. They must learn that a disability is not something to be hidden or ashamed of. One of the best environments to teach these skills is through relationships with peers who have faced similar situations (please refer to the Disability Education white paper for further information).