

Running head: Leadership Development

Leadership Development and the Youth Voice

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

2011

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Table of Contents

Youth Leadership Development Institute	1
Introduction to the Youth Leadership Development Institute (YLDI).....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Purpose of the YLDI.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Youth Leadership Development Institute White Papers	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Introduction to the White Papers.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Leadership Development and the Youth Voice	4
Introduction	4
Barriers.....	4
Fitting In.....	4
Having a Right to Accommodations	5
Confidence	5
Comfort.....	5
Conclusion	6

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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Leadership Development and the Youth Voice

Introduction

For a youth, finding one's voice is of the highest importance. Speaking up when in class and at home is pivotal in making sure needs are met. As youth come to find that they have an impact on the decisions that are made on their behalf, they experience responsibility. The goal is for this responsibility to broaden, and for the youth to learn how to self-advocate and take an active role in daily life.

Once this point is reached, youth take on not only a role of responsibility, but also a role of leadership. A leader is anyone who takes an active role in shaping their environment. At play, a child who is a leader will contribute ideas for new games. In the classroom, student leaders will raise their hand to share their thoughts, or volunteer to speak on behalf of a cohort.

For youth to become leaders and learn to use their voices is a process, and that process is different for each individual. Every person, young or old, has the potential to be a leader. The barriers that a person must overcome before they can reach their potential are many, especially for youth with disabilities.

Barriers

Fitting In

PROBLEM

Self image can be easily influenced by cultural standards. Too often, youth with disabilities have a negative self image if they don't match the standard profile, leaving them feeling like they must not be as good as others who are "normal." These feelings can arise from being the only one in the group who doesn't share the norm, whether it is an issue of speech, comprehension, mobility, appearance, or other.

RESOLUTION

Increasing interaction with peers with disabilities- Every person can have a positive self image. For youth with disabilities who have self image problems, it is often helpful for them to have a broader perspective of the population. It is important for youth with disabilities to know that there are other youth with whom they can identify more closely, within the disability community.

Having a Right to Accommodations

PROBLEM

It is difficult for youth with disabilities to have a positive self image if they feel that they are seen as a burden. Young leaders with disabilities at the Leadership Development Institutes often stated that they believed that individuals with disabilities or who needed accommodation were often seen as a burden to the rest of society.

RESOLUTION

Illuminating the success of people with disabilities- An individual needs to know that what they have to offer to society is valuable, and that this value warrants necessary accommodations by our society. Seeing the accomplishments in leadership of other youth with disabilities can inspire youth to take their accommodations and facilitate them, rather than see themselves as a burden.

Confidence

PROBLEM

Youth with disabilities lack confidence in their ability to lead and often feel that their personal life experiences would not be relevant or beneficial to others.

RESOLUTION

Story telling- It is important to inform youth with disabilities that their stories of struggles can be retold in ways to improve the lives of others. When their stories are presented to others (including policy makers), they are making a difference for the disability community.

Comfort

PROBLEM

General conversation outside of the disability community often leaves out talk about disabilities. This can make youth with disabilities unfamiliar with holding a conversation about their disability. This unfamiliarity can make youth uncomfortable with talking about their disability and their needs.

RESOLUTION

Talking about disability- To tell their stories, youth with disabilities first have to be comfortable with communicating with others on important issues and personal struggles. This type of comfort comes with practice. Therefore, it is vital for youth to have the opportunity to be involved with a group that talks about disability life and culture.

Conclusion

Once a youth achieves positive self image, confidence, and comfort, they can begin to grow as a leader. Leadership takes effort and practice. Leadership development aims to provide the best environment for this growth process to take place.

The best model for a leadership development support system is to create an environment within the disability community where youth are inspired to become leaders by a group of youth leaders with disabilities. Those newly inspired leaders would then inspire more youth to become leaders in their communities. This network of youth with disabilities serves as a way to increase the representation of disabled persons in their communities through the new leaders developed therein. After the help of youth leadership, there will be many more leaders in the community who can speak for the needs of those with disabilities.