

# Warren County Virginia Youth Advisory Board

## **The Problem**

A community wide Court Best Practices Summit was held on October 19, 2012. The goal of the meeting was to identify and begin working toward removing the most significant and reoccurring barriers to getting the children who come before the court the services they need.

Attendees were County officials, juvenile court judges, court services, law enforcement, schools, health department, social services, community mental health, attorneys and service providers.

As a result of the work done at the Best Practices Summit, participants identified a need to develop a strategic plan for Warren County Youth Services. A planning group was formed and they met monthly to determine the best way to accomplish this important project. The group engaged in a detailed scoping process. The strategic plan would serve as the roadmap for the transformation of services for all youth and their families in three areas:

- Prevention
- Early Intervention
- Intervention

On December 9-10, 2013, Warren County convened a group of 25 community partners to identify the needs of at risk youth and their families and to prepare a strategic plan to guide the County. Participants included representatives of local government, social services, parks and recreation, juvenile and domestic relations court, law enforcement, schools, mental health services, non-profits, public health and the local medical community, parents, and citizens. Participants met for two days with a strategic

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planning consultant to engage in dialogue and complete a series of activities designed to help them examine trends and needs, create a vision, and develop goals and action plans. Meeting participants were successful in outlining many of the trends and/or challenges facing Warren County, as well as their implications for local youth and families. Through this process, the group developed the Warren County Youth Services Strategic Plan. The Plan creates a broad long-term vision, as well as identifies potential goals and strategies that would support the vision.

To ensure the success of this vision by 2018, Warren County identified five strategic target areas with specific goals that must be achieved, which include:

- Central Coordination of Access and Funding: Creating an oversight body dedicated to expanding opportunities for our youth and families, as well as moving our strategic plan forward. This would include implementing a system of centralized referral for critical youth and family oriented services.
- Prevention and Identification of Risk Factors: Developing mechanisms for community partners to identify those citizens who are “at risk”, and develop evidence-based strategies to reduce that risk. This would include initiatives to educate our community about local risk factors.
- Youth Based Programming: Improving participation in existing youth programming and services, and expand those programs in order to meet the needs of uninvolved youth. This would include improving communication about and removing barriers to becoming involved in our community.
- Integrated Transportation: Expanding our transportation system to better meet the needs of youth and their families, and improve accessibility to health,

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employment, and youth activities. This would include the possibility of after-school activity buses, and identifying new transportation-based funding initiatives.

- Economic Sustainability and Self-Sufficiency: Maintaining a high quality educational system for both public and non-traditional/non-public school students and developing strategies to address the impacts of poverty and affordable housing. This would include promoting Front Royal/Warren County as a place to do business, and aligning our community needs with potential future development.

### **The Program**

The group decided that a youth and family oriented multi-disciplinary oversight group must be created to carry the work of the Warren County Youth Services Strategic Plan forward.

The Warren County Youth Advisory Board convened the first meeting in January, 2014.

The group is comprised of thirteen members. The group meets bi-monthly and the working committees meet in the alternate months.

The Board formed two working committees: the Central Coordination of Access and Funding Committee and the Exploratory Committee.

### **The Central Coordination of Access and Funding Committee**

The work that was done during the development of the Warren County Youth Services Strategic Plan identified a need in the community for a centralized intake process for families in crisis. These families may not have reached the level of crisis that met the

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criteria for existing agencies such as the foster care system, juvenile justice or mental health commitment. We saw a need for a centralized intake process that would emphasize natural support systems and community based services. Families would be accessed, given targeted referrals and provided follow-up to ensure that they received the help they needed. The data from that process would also facilitate the identification of community needs and service gaps.

The committee requested funding in the next budget cycle for one full-time employee and the funding was approved for FY 2016. The position description was developed and the job has been filled. The committee has developed a training schedule and has enlisted committee members to engage in the training and shadowing process to provide the position with an expansive knowledge of community resources.

### **The Exploratory Committee**

The Warren County Parks and Recreation Department provides a wide array of traditional programs for children and youth in our community. Often the children of families in crisis are under-served by these traditional programs.

In the spring of 2015, our committee surveyed 1,289 Warren County middle school and high school students regarding their involvement in “recreational activities”. In this context, “recreational activities” were defined as any activities the youth enjoyed participating in, or would like to participate in based upon their interests. These surveys were completed electronically using a terminal placed in English classes at all grade levels. The key information collected in this survey included (1) level of current or past involvement in recreational activities, (2) factors that encourage participation in

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recreational activities, (3) factors that may create barriers or disincentives towards participating in recreational activities, and (4) feedback of the development of typical recreational programs. This survey was exploratory in nature. Its purpose was to identify adolescent-friendly ways to obtain critical information regarding involvement in recreational activities.

In the fall of 2015, the committee then surveyed a sub-set of adolescents who were determined by their school guidance counselors to be “under-involved” in recreational activities. The survey was created in collaboration with the guidance counselors, and was then completed 1:1 in an interview format by the counselors. The first purpose of this survey was to follow up on information collected in the spring 2015 survey. It was important to understand how a sub-set of “under-involved” youth may differ in their response patterns from those provided by the 1,289 students previously surveyed. The second purpose was to test out the wording of revised survey questions in order for the sub-committee to obtain critical information.

While the first two surveys were essentially targeted at survey design, they did nonetheless yield some important data. For example, the primary reasons students become involved in recreational activities are to (1) be with friends/meet new friends, and (2) to have fun. Peer influence on recreational choices varies, but family influence is consistently high. The barriers towards participation vary depending on the age of the adolescent. For example, lack of transportation or money is a factor for middle school students, but not for high school students. The “under-involved” adolescents reported having more time to start new recreational activities, while the larger group reported that lack of available time was a factor in becoming more involved. In general, all

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respondents endorsed the desire to have a greater range of activities available. Finally, some of the data demonstrated that middle school students have the greatest desire to be more involved, and yet have the most challenges in this regard.

The sub-committee was able to create a final and formal survey to be administered to all Warren County middle and high school students in the spring of 2016. The survey design has incorporated learning points from the first two surveys. The electronic survey will be followed up by a focus group survey process of youth representing the various grades. The results will be provided to the local government by September 2016. The intent of report will be to make recommendations to the local government and community partners on the design and development of future recreational activities in the County.

### **The Cost of the Program**

The planning committee for the two-day strategic planning sessions felt that the success of the sessions would be greatly enhanced by a professional facilitator.

- Strategic Planning Facilitator: \$8,465.20
- Central Intake Position: \$38,199 salary and benefits

### **Results**

The beginning phases involved extensive planning and community collaboration. We were very successful in achieving community wide engagement in the development of the Warren County Youth Services Strategic Plan. We developed from that our Youth Advisory Board, appointed by the Warren County Board of Supervisors, to implement the actions outlined in the Strategic Plan. The working committees have also engaged

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in specific research and planning to address the needs identified. The entire Board meets bi-monthly and the subcommittees meet in the alternate months to ensure that the actions identified in the Strategic Plan remain on track and the project continues to move forward.

### **Worthiness**

This program addresses all the stated criteria for recognition.

- The centralized intake process is a new service offered to the community to fill an identified service gap and will provide data to determine if early interventions can reduce or delay the need for more costly and disruptive interventions such as foster care placements, incarcerations and hospitalizations.
  - Training provided to the centralized intake position will create an expansive knowledge base of all youth serving agencies and private providers.
  - Youth surveys will facilitate more informed decisions by recreation and school staff in designing recreational and after-school activities.
  - All levels of government, including members of the governing board, the county administrator, citizen youth leaders and decision-makers from all key departments serving youth, are represented on the advisory board.
  - This body can be used as a sounding board and a screening mechanism for budgetary requests from new or ongoing youth serving agencies.
  - This process could be replicated in any community.

## **The Warren County Youth Advisory Board Brief Summary**

A community wide Court Best Practices Summit was held on October 19, 2012. As a result of the work done at the Best Practices Summit, participants identified a need to develop a Strategic Plan for Warren County Youth Services.

The Strategic Plan became the roadmap for the transformation of services for all youth and their families in three areas: Prevention, Early Intervention, and Intervention.

To ensure the success of this vision by 2018, Warren County has identified five strategic target areas with specific goals that must be achieved, which include:

- Central Coordination of Access and Funding
- Prevention and Identification of Risk Factors
- Youth Based Programming
- Integrated Transportation
- Economic Sustainability and Self-Sufficiency

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## **Press Release**

Warren County has taken a structured approach to developing and evaluating youth services in its community. The need for a strategic plan for youth services was identified at a Court Best Practices Summit that was held in October 2012. The Warren County Youth Services Strategic Plan was developed in December 2013 by representatives of local government, social services, parks and recreation, juvenile and domestic relations court, law enforcement, schools, mental health services, non-profits, public health, and the local medical community, parents, and citizens. Participants met for two days with a strategic planning consultant to engage in dialogue and complete a series of activities designed to help them examine trends and needs, create a vision, and develop goals and action plans.

To ensure the success of this vision by 2018, Warren County has identified five strategic target areas with specific goals that must be achieved, which include:

- Central Coordination of Access and Funding
- Prevention and Identification of Risk Factors
- Youth Based Programming
- Integrated Transportation
- Economic Sustainability and Self-Sufficiency

The group also decided that a youth and family oriented multi-disciplinary oversight group should be established in order to carry the work outlined in the Strategic Plan forward. The Warren County Youth Advisory Board convened its first meeting in January 2014. The group is comprised of thirteen members and meets bi-monthly with the working committees meeting in alternate months.

The Central Coordination of Access and Funding Committee's focus is on a centralized intake process to better serve families in crisis. The Exploratory Committee has been surveying middle and high school students to determine their interest in, or barriers to, participating in after school recreational activities. The intent of the survey is make recommendations to local government and community partners on the design and development of future recreational activities in Warren County.