

Advocating for Our Future: A Working Agenda for St. Louis Children and Youth

Background Information

Young people are in the age group at highest risk for engaging in violent behavior and becoming victims of violence. As summer approaches, they become even more vulnerable. Violent crime rates rise in the summer and youth are more likely to be victimized during hours when they are not in school. Unfortunately there is no easy fix for this problem or the related issues of academic failure, lack of jobs or job training for youth, limited recreation opportunities and a broken health and mental health system that youth find extremely difficult to navigate. The document addresses four crucial unmet needs for youth -- **Education, Health Jobs and Recreation.**

Advocating for our Future was created by the Youth Crime and Delinquency Working Group, an ad-hoc group of people who are very concerned about youth violence and youth well being in St. Louis. **Advocating for our Future** was created because it is time for young people, service providers, faith leaders, advocates, community leaders and others to raise awareness about the underlying causes of youth violence. We will be asking these stakeholders and others to endorse the Agenda and to advocate for its implementation. AFF is a tool to help advocate for young people in an organized way. The Youth Crime and Delinquency Working Group wants to demonstrate that there are serious concerns about the unmet needs of our youth and to build a base of support for addressing these concerns.

The issues in this document are not meant to be an exhaustive list - our young people need much more to succeed and thrive. However, these areas were selected because they are universal -- all youth need these things in their lives. Without access to quality programs in these areas, young people are more likely to be drawn into gangs, violence and delinquency.

The Agenda

Children in metropolitan St. Louis need our help. Many of our children face serious risk factors like poverty and academic failure. Others face so many risk factors that they are constantly surrounded by risk. They live "in risk", unable to overcome constant challenges that make them less likely to succeed and more likely to fail. This document was created to be a "working agenda" and begin the conversation about how to better help our youth. It seeks to engage youth, parents, members of the faith community, service providers, and others to look at four critical areas that impact young people -- Health, Education, Jobs and Recreation. In putting these issues out for public discussion elected officials, candidates and policy makers can be challenged to develop plans and leverage resources.

This document is not an exhaustive list. All the risks and obstacles that children face must be addressed through a connected quilt of resources, services and communities. Please use the ideas in this document to start conversations, challenge assumptions and help make the St. Louis region a place where youth can thrive.

Recreation and After School Programs for Young People

We must make safe and effective recreation and after school programs available to our youth. According to the US Department of Justice young people spend as much as 25 hours a week in the time between school dismissal and when parents get off of work. Youth who are unsupervised in these hours are exposed to serious risk factors. They are more likely to engage in substance abuse, experience poor academic performance and drop out of school than youth who have supervision. Older youth and young adults living in risk also need safe places to go to, especially during late afternoon and evening hours. These young people are more likely to face crime and abuse if they do not have a safe place away from the street.

To protect these young people and keep them safe we must provide:

Quality, Afterschool Programs for Children and Young Adolescents:

- ⊙ Provide a safe and secure environment
- ⊙ Offer a structured environment run by qualified and well trained staff
- ⊙ Improve outcomes for social development and academic achievement
- ⊙ Operate between the end of school day and 6PM
- ⊙ Be within safe walking distance of home or offer safe transportation
- ⊙ Include help with homework, as well as, a variety of more conventional recreation activities
- ⊙ Utilize public and private recreation centers, community education centers, schools, churches and other facilities

Recreation Programs for Older Adolescents and Young Adults:

- ⊙ Provide a safe and secure environment
- ⊙ Operate late in the day until at least 11PM, including weekends
- ⊙ Provide opportunities to build relationships with caring adults and other youth
- ⊙ Build personal development skills, values and social consciousness
- ⊙ Utilize public and private recreation centers, community education centers, schools, churches and other facilities
- ⊙ Provide staff and activities
- ⊙ Offer programs that build skills for avoiding risk -- conflict resolution, anger management, communication skills etc.
- ⊙ Utilize unconventional outreach and public relations strategies to make these young people aware of the centers and ensure they are comfortable when they attend.

Jobs and Job Readiness

We must provide young people opportunities for meaningful employment¹. These jobs must be paid work experience with quality supervision, a well-designed learning plan, and connections to supportive services, particularly positive youth development and mentoring activities. Academic achievement, interpersonal skills, hopes for the future, and self esteem are increased through youth employment while risky behaviors related to crime have are reduced. In order to reach the goal of meaningful employment we must offer:

Employment Resources:

- ⊙ Connect youth, particularly youth from high-risk neighborhoods, with employers that provide jobs,
- ⊙ Emphasize summer and after school employment.

Entrepreneurship:

- ⊙ Empower youth to think creatively
- ⊙ Support youth in creating opportunities for self employment.

Workplace Skills:

- ⊙ Develop job-readiness skills training programs
- ⊙ Offer a comprehensive curriculum that ensures an 8th Grader entering high school is ready to apply for and retain employment.

Mentoring:

- ⊙ Provide mentoring from caring adults with applicable experience.
- ⊙ Guide young people through the process of learning about and functioning in a job culture
- ⊙ Help youth develop interpersonal and coping skills

Quality Education

Education is a fundamental human right and is essential to a humane and civilized society. Last year, the U.S. public education system was ranked 17th among 50 other countries by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The lack of education has serious consequences for individual citizens and our society as a whole. A vast body of evidence links poor education to poverty, a lack of economic mobility and an ill-prepared workforce. Our obligation is to adequately fund our educational system--from pre-school to college—in ways that will constantly prepare us to meet the challenges facing our country in the 21st Century.

Children Emotionally and Academically Prepared to Enter School:

- ⊙ Offer access to pre-kindergarten programs such as Head Start for all children living in risk or facing multiple risk factors
- ⊙ Provide training and materials for parents so they can help their children prepare for school

¹Youth Violence Prevention Funder Learning Collaborative. "2012 Meaningful Youth Employment Investment Guide." 2012

Teacher Training and Incentives:

- ⊙ Provide incentives to teachers who are culturally competent and innovative
- ⊙ Provide teacher training that ensures high level performance and development
- ⊙ Address the needs of teachers who face particular challenges

Increase the Efficacy of Learning and Support Youth Through School-based and School-linked Programs and Services:

- ⊙ Integrate social services into the school
- ⊙ Mobilize parental involvement and community support at the school level.

Focus on the Racial and Socio-economic Disparities:

- ⊙ Address disproportionate higher suspension and drop-out rate for African Americans
- ⊙ Develop comprehensive plan to address the deepening achievement gap that fuels the school to prison pipeline

Health Care for Youth

We must provide better health care, access to health care and prevention for our young people. Some of the health care indicators for youth and adolescents in the US are disturbing. According to the national center for health statistics: **one quarter of all children have gone for six months or more without seeing a doctor**; 9.4 million or 12 % of children living in the U.S had at least one emergency room visit per year; approximately 7 million or 10% of children have asthma and; 18% of youth are obese. More than half of the young people with mental health problems receive no treatment or services. Violence is also a major public health problem. According to OJJDP, approximately four youth per day are homicide victims and three out of four are killed by a firearm. Young people are equally likely to commit suicide each year. Although there has been some progress locally relating to regional coordination and knowledge of public health, the St. Louis region's youth health indicators region mirror those on the national level.

- ⊙ Youth violence is a serious public health problem and public health principles should be used to address it.
- ⊙ A public health approach should also be used to address other issues and disparities.
- ⊙ All youth and young adults must have access to quality health care and screenings with an emphasis on prevention, including crime and violence prevention.
- ⊙ Young people should have access to exercise facilities, information about nutrition and healthy food in their schools and in their neighborhoods
- ⊙ Youth must have access to mental health services and work must be done to reduce the stigma of mental illness.