

Capturing Promising Practices in
Recruitment and Retention
of Frontline Youth Workers

A Project of the National Collaboration for Youth

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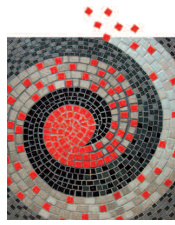
Retention Begins with Recruitment and is Ongoing



I once worked with a young man at a local agency who was from the community and who had a natural ability to be an effective youth worker. He could understand and speak honestly to the young people, had the skills he needed to really make a difference, loved what he did and where he worked—just the type of person we want to recruit and retain. But we lost “Joe”. Joe had a dilemma: he had to support his family, and so he took another job. You can now find him working as the doorman at a major hotel downtown. This is a loss that our young people cannot afford.

Mo Barbosa, Massachusetts

Good recruitment strategies often prove to be a critical first step in the successful retention of competent youth workers. The maintenance of a stable workforce can only come about when organizations recruit the right people for the right reasons and then compensate, train, and support them so that they are motivated to stay. For instance, the decision to work with youth is not necessarily based on individuals’ beliefs that they are or want to be experts in the field. For some, it is a desire to pay back what someone did for them, to follow in the footsteps of a role model, or simply to make a difference in their community.⁸ For others, it is “the joy of being with young people, learning from them, contributing to their success and having the opportunity to advocate for young people and help them be heard.”⁹ For many it may be a first job that brings in needed income for rent or college tuition. Regardless of the motivation, a sense of “doing good” will not be enough to keep individuals in the youth work field without the prospect of making a living wage or having benefits that help ensure a secure future. Likewise, unless youth service agencies make an intentional effort to bring qualified individuals into the field, efforts aimed at attaining positive outcomes for our nation’s youth will be compromised.



RECRUITMENT

Hiring individuals who are committed and passionate about working with young people is vital to positive outcomes for the futures of youth, families, communities, and the nation.¹⁰ By being deliberate, creating strategies for recruitment, and putting time, money, and energy into securing the right candidates, organizations are finding they can recruit and often retain staff more effectively and achieve the diversity and quality they need. What follows are a few examples of what local organizations are doing to recruit frontline youth workers and avoid constant staff turnover.

Provide Incentives

Too often organizations have the mindset that these positions turn over quickly, and therefore they don't invest in developing a process to attract great people.

Studies show that a perception of compatibility among the individual staff members, co-workers, and the work environment positively affects work-related behaviors and outcomes.¹¹ Consistent with this research, youth service organizations report that some of their most effective employees are those who were recruited by staff members. As a result, many agencies provide incentives to encourage existing staff to recruit new workers. In addition, organizations are finding that offering current workers an incentive to return during the next season is an effective recruitment and retention strategy.

*Russ Finkelstein
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Offer a Finder's Fee: Camp Fire USA Alaska Council pays part-time workers a fee for referring individuals to the agency (\$100 at hiring date and \$50 after six months of employment). Not only does the agency receive help in recruiting good staff, but the work environment potentially becomes cohesive more quickly because new staff are already familiar with the individuals with whom they are working.



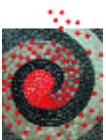
Promote Peer Recruitment: Westside YMCA believes that qualified and competent staff members tend to have friends whose background and work ethic are similar to their own. In an effort to hire “like-minded” staff, the organization offers a \$50 incentive to current staff members who refer job candidates. When such individuals are hired and again once they have worked for 90 days, the referring staff members receive an additional \$25 referral incentive.

Offer a Return Incentive: Since many of Westside YMCA’s camp, aquatics and after-school programs are seasonal, the agency’s hiring efforts often focus on college students who might be looking for jobs during their breaks from school. At the end of each program cycle, staff members are offered a \$25 incentive to return for the next one, and an additional \$25 after 90 days. Having staff return provides the organization with leadership and program continuity. It also reduces the time and cost of having to recruit, hire and train new workers for each program cycle. At Westside YMCA, the return incentive resulted in an 85 percent staff retention rate over the last five years.

Capitalize on Technology

The Internet has become a major force in recruiting staff. Posting jobs on a Web site provides organizations with access to an immense pool of potential applicants. Likewise, Web-based job postings that allow completion of applications online make it easier for candidates who are willing to relocate to apply for positions outside their immediate area.

Use Online Job Matching: Over the past ten years, Idealist.org has served as an online clearinghouse for job opportunities at nonprofit organizations, particularly in the field of youth service. Organizations looking for workers post their positions on the Idealist.org Web site; individuals who access the site can search for desired job, internship, or volunteer opportunities in a variety of ways (e.g., by organization, geographic location, type of youth work desired) and can create profiles that generate automatic job announcements daily.



Create Specific Strategies for College-Age Workers

To attract the best and brightest applicants, you need to make a pitch to young people that combines an ability to solve big problems, gain skills and demonstrates how one can have a career doing this work.

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A recent study of the San Francisco Beacon Initiative workforce found that while youth workers range in age from 19 to 63 years with an average age of 28, the most common age within the Beacon workforce is 23 years.¹² This is not surprising, since for many a job as a frontline youth worker may be one of their first. College campuses represent an under-utilized source of talented, quality program staff.

Partner with Colleges and Universities: The YMCA of Greater Seattle has found that building strong relationships with local colleges and universities helps the program recruit frontline youth workers. At the University of Washington, for example the YMCA teen leadership director teaches seminars on positive youth development and practical youth development skills. As a part of the course, students work in YMCA programs to practice the very skills and techniques upon which the seminars focus. The YMCA feels that by providing intensive training experiences and manageable field work tasks, it is increasing students' interest in becoming full-time youth workers.

Participate in Career and Graduate School Fairs:

Idealist.org promotes the development of relationships between youth service agencies and local colleges and universities by promoting career and graduate school fairs. These forums enable college students to explore youth work as a possible career. They help universities find ways to involve their students in the life of the surrounding community through internships and other connections to agencies. In addition, youth service organizations gain an opportunity to increase public awareness of the work they are doing, and to counsel and mentor young adults whose ambition it is to become youth workers.



Begin with Young Youth Workers: Leadership & Renewal Outfitters offers a year-long Journey Fellowship program for young adults ages 18 to 22 years old who have expressed an interest in working with youth. The application asks for responses that will be used to determine whether interested individuals are *ready* to do the work, *willing* to commit the time, and *able* to work around family or job commitments in order to participate in the program.

The program consists of four weekend retreats that help participants explore who they are and what they want to be doing with their lives. In addition, they are mentored by experienced youth workers and work as interns to gain exposure to youth work. All costs for housing, meals, retreats, internships, and materials are paid by the Journey Fellowship program. Graduates help recruit new applicants from their high school or college campuses and become a strong voice promoting the youth work profession.

Reach Out for Diversity

Keeping community roots intact and developing neighborhood-specific youth centers makes a difference in the response from the youth in that neighborhood.

Virginia Witt

The San Francisco

Beacon Initiative



Nationwide demographics continue to change dramatically. As they do it becomes imperative for the staff of youth development agencies to reflect the ethnic makeup of their communities. This will clearly convey to youth and the agency's community a commitment to all youth. Furthermore, research has shown that linguistic and cultural competency is equal in importance to other skills required of youth workers.¹³

Reflect the Culture of the Community: Recruiting high-quality staff who are fully reflective of the diversity of the youth being served can be an important part of program success. Public Allies considers young people from diverse backgrounds to be assets in their communities. The program is committed to developing indigenous leadership in the communities and neighborhoods it serves, and

providing qualified candidates with paid apprenticeships at community organizations. Through Public Allies, interested young adults apply to participate in a ten-month AmeriCorps experience. Public Allies screens applicants, choosing the best 25 to participate as “Allies” in the program, and then brings together the Allies and such sponsoring organizations as Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Cincinnati. The interview process allows the sponsoring organizations and the Allies to interview each other—a process designed to result in a “mutual choice.” The cost of compensating Allies is split by the sponsoring organization and AmeriCorps. This experience has led some Allies to become full-time youth workers and others to advocate for policy change in their communities.

The Methodist Children's Home spends approximately \$2,000 to \$3,000 per year for advertising in bilingual newspapers and on Web sites. Costs for staff involvement with community groups is currently budgeted at \$8,000; however this figure is dependent on the number of staff involved.

Network within the Community: In an effort to recruit qualified minority staff members, Methodist Children’s Home uses bilingual newspapers and Web sites to advertise open positions. It also partners with community organizations like the Mexican American and Black Chambers of Commerce in sponsoring multicultural workshops.

Utilize Career Centers: The Purdue Black Cultural Center works to inspire students to become youth workers. The Center recognizes that youth work necessitates gaining knowledge in a variety of areas (e.g., social work, human development, psychology, fund-raising), and that this need for interdisciplinary expertise can be stressful and lead to burnout. The organization encourages students interested in youth work careers to get a degree of interest to them and, to get as much relevant volunteer experience as possible. The Center also provides students with supportive renewal activities that help them discover ways to avoid burnout as they move into a career in youth work.



Prepare Youth to be Youth Workers

Many young people need jobs, and many high school-aged girls like working with younger girls. Building on these two factors, interest in youth work can be developed at an early age and guide career decisions later.

*Patty Fernandez
Girls Inc.
of the Central Coast/
Action Council
of Monterey County*

Young people need guidance from significant adults in order to attain social, vocational, and civic competence, but they also need opportunities to practice learned skills and behaviors.¹⁴ Many organizations are finding a wealth of skills and enthusiasm in high school-aged youth workers—more often than not the same youth who once participated in their programs.

Engage Youth as Leaders: Girls Inc. of the Central Coast believes that inviting school-aged girls to participate in a youth leadership program is the best recruitment strategy. All girls who become paid staff for Girls Inc. of the Central Coast begin as participants in the high school leadership program. The organization asks the schools to refer promising candidates. The ten-month-long leadership program, led by program graduates in partnership with adult volunteers, teaches the girls leadership and public speaking skills. When they complete the program, they are eligible to apply for a position as a Youth Leader or a Teen Teaching Team member. Generally, 15 to 25 girls are hired each year as program facilitators. They are given ample opportunities to make decisions and participate in the planning and implementation of the agency's elementary, middle, and high school initiatives.

Offer Internships: The YMCA of Greater Kansas City works with local high schools to provide opportunities for students to meet the internship requirements of the school's work study program. Students are hired as part-time assistants for a year-long work study program. As supervised assistants, they help with program planning and implementation. Each quarter, students are reviewed by staff. As a result of this internship experience, many work study students discover first hand what a career in youth work would be like and decide to work for the YMCA of Greater Kansas City after graduating from high school.

