

***“A nation that truly wants no child left behind must make sure that workers who care for children, youth, and families have the motivation, resources, and support to succeed.”***

*The Health of the Human Services Workforce*  
by Paul Light

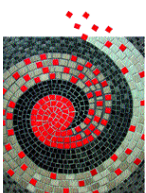
## **HIGHLY-SKILLED FRONTLINE YOUTH WORKERS**

Current research is finding that staff who work directly with youth in community-based organizations are an essential component in creating program environments that facilitate positive development in youth.<sup>1</sup> A common challenge faced by these organizations, however, is how to attract and retain qualified individuals. The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s March 2003 report, *The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce* documented many conditions that were at odds with developing and keeping a healthy, productive human services workforce: heavy workloads, long hours, and high vulnerability to burnout; high turnover among the most talented employees; significant minorities reporting that they do not have access to essential resources; low pay, few rewards for talent and achievement; and a dissatisfaction with the low level of respect received for their work.<sup>2</sup>

Since skilled workers are needed to implement effective youth programs, frequent turnovers can result in a continual influx of inexperienced and inadequately trained workers.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, since the development of positive youth-adult interactions is critical to effective programming, high turnover can present a significant challenge to program success because of the time it takes to develop those relationships.<sup>4</sup> The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), in its report entitled *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time*, emphasizes the critical link between youth outcomes and positive relationships with skilled

staff.<sup>5</sup> HFRP's consultations with leaders in the youth development field revealed a strong consensus that the most important ingredients for obtaining quality in out-of-school youth development programs include staff recruitment, training and professional development.<sup>6</sup> However, there is often a vast difference between what youth workers are asked to do and how well they are equipped for the task, with inadequate training, support, and program resources leading to increased levels of burnout and shortened tenure among staff.<sup>7</sup>

Several themes emerge in the literature as factors essential to promoting youth worker success: (1) opportunities for professional development and training; (2) working in supportive environments and climates that foster success (this includes adequate supervision and good co-worker collaboration); (3) clear role descriptions and perceived competence to perform that role; (4) a sense that their work is valued; and (5) a professional organization, understanding of organizational mission, and opportunities for networking.<sup>8 9 10 11 12</sup> In spite of the fact that these factors are individually identified, it is difficult to separate them completely in a practical sense. For example, community-based youth work is often seasonal or considered a stepping stone toward professional development to other career opportunities. As a result, the amount of training youth workers receive can be inconsistent and vary greatly in content. Consistent training would not only advance youth workers' knowledge, but also provide opportunities to develop a "professional" support network and a supportive work environment. Likewise, as the work environment becomes more supportive, the likelihood for youth workers to feel a "team" connection to other staff members increases, resulting in a more positive organizational climate. Defined as "the attitudes which employees collectively hold about their work environment", organizational climate can affect job satisfaction, quality of services, and youth outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, as the organization is clearer about their mission, vision, and goals youth workers can attain a greater sense of connection and direction for the work they need to do.<sup>14</sup>



## IDENTIFYING PROMISING PRACTICES

Working with youth, while rewarding, also is emotionally and physically challenging. Staff turnover is likely to be high without adequate support, supervision, resources, and training, thus requiring a continual rebuilding of the direct service segment of the youth organization.<sup>15 16 17</sup> Given the ongoing interest in providing high quality programming for youth in our communities, a better understanding of how to keep skilled program staff engaged in youth development work must become a high priority. Therefore, *Capturing Promising Practices in Recruitment and Retention of Frontline Youth Workers* examines how selected organizations have already put into effect practical and concrete activities for dealing with these issues as they relate to youth workers.

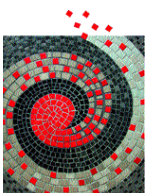
As a first step in identifying “promising practice” strategies in the recruitment and retention of frontline youth workers, members of the National Collaboration for Youth were asked to complete a web-based survey. After results from the web-based survey were analyzed, representatives from selected organizations were interviewed to provide practical strategies for recruiting and retaining qualified and competent youth workers.

## RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Effective practices for frontline youth workers utilized by the sixteen selected organizations center around three overall themes but represent multiple concrete and doable strategies. A certain amount of interconnectedness exists between the themes, indicating the need for a comprehensive and intentional approach to successful recruitment and retention. This is particularly important since many recruitment and retention strategies have policy and procedure implications on the entire organization.

### ***Provide Frontline Youth Workers Needed Skills and Support for Learning.***

Providing highly-skilled youth workers begins with ensuring a pipeline of passionate and educable workers. Providing students opportunities for internships, work study programs, and practical experiences that meet course requirements through local high schools, colleges, and universities gives them a chance to explore youth work as a career option. Once they are hired, helping



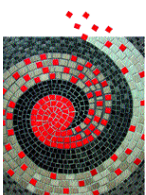
youth workers explore their interests and career goals can assist the organization in providing them the best educational and skill building experience through specific training and exposure to a variety of youth work situations. In addition, offering education incentives, such as tuition reimbursement, helps them attain their identified educational goals and often encourages them to continue working with youth.

Recognizing that *all* staff are on a developmental path and need the skills to effectively provide significant learning experiences for youth makes investing heavily in their development essential. Providing consistent and continual training, support, and career development can result in a changed image of youth work, and motivate staff to transition from perceiving their job as a temporary position to contemplating youth work as a profession. Additionally, offering pay incentives for increasing their learning and skills places a discernible value on getting more specialized training and education, and indicates that stronger skill development is imperative.

Mentoring, whether formal (new staff are paired with more experienced staff) or informal (idea sharing, problem-solving, and networking with each other), is another means of increasing and deepening support, learning, and skill development among staff. By working with a mentor, staff gain self-confidence, develop a greater ability to do their jobs, and begin to grasp a larger vision of youth development than they might if working alone. Likewise, learning from each other facilitates the development of relationships among co-workers and a sense of connectedness within the organization, which can ultimately increase job satisfaction and staff retention.

### ***Value Frontline Youth Workers.***

Including staff as active participants in program planning, decision making, staff recruitment, and program evaluation is a way of communicating that they are respected and valued by the organization. As partners in the process, staff receive clear and complete communication, which enables them to perform more effectively and implement programs more efficiently. In addition, they feel empowered by having the opportunity to offer direction for the organization.

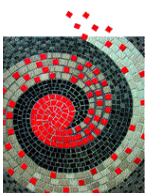


One of the best ways to insure that the work experience is a good one is by setting up an inclusive environment and ensuring that youth workers feel needed, valued, recognized, and supported within the larger organization. Particularly when direct care staff work in remote areas and are somewhat isolated from others, it is crucial for them to feel they have a peer network and someone advocating for them on a broader level. Activities that provide staff opportunities to hear updates about what others are doing and discuss day-to-day challenges also offers an opportunity for staff to get to know each other better. In this way, organizations can maintain an environment that is supportive and challenging in which staff not only work well together, but also have fun together. Additionally, learning skills that help staff recognize when fellow youth workers are becoming discouraged, and how to mentor, support, and encourage them is important to a sense of connectedness among the staff.

Youth work is challenging, and staff need to feel valued. Providing youth workers a supportive environment in which they can take time to reflect on their individual purposes and reconnect with their reasons for working with youth can be important to renewing their commitment and the energy needed to continue their work. Having opportunities for renewal can help staff discover ways to sustain themselves over time, offsetting potential burnout as they progress through their careers in youth work. In addition, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that staff have responsibilities outside of work. By offering options, such as flexible hours for example, staff gain a sense that they are respected as individuals.

***Instill Respect for the Importance of the Youth Work Profession.***

Direct care staff work with the nation's most prized possessions and have an opportunity to make a genuine difference with our current as well as future leaders. Communicating the value of the work being done with youth, and how it contributes to the future welfare of the both the local community and society in general is essential to building respect for the profession. Taking the initiative to be leaders in the community as advocates for youth, setting high expectations for staff, programs, and program participants conveys the value youth workers place on themselves and the work they do, and raises the image of the youth service profession among staff and within the community.



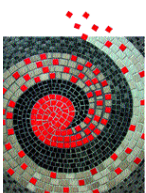
Offering opportunities for leadership is just one way to promote a more professional image of “youth work” among the staff. As a result, highly trained and competent staff are able to provide quality programs and enhance the organization’s reputation in the community as being a good place to work because of the value placed on the staff. Establishing a respected presence in the community conveys the value of the work being done with youth, and the image of the youth development profession is advanced.

Networking in the community is another way of increasing awareness of the value of youth work. Partnering with individuals and other organizations in the community utilizes valuable resources and engages community members in the youth work process. For example, co-sponsoring multi-cultural workshops with different racial/ethnic organizations in the community increases awareness of program needs among diverse groups, as well as establishing a positive presence in the community. This can be an effective approach in recruiting diverse staff.

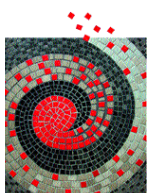
In the following case studies, organizations identify their effective practices to best recruit and retain frontline youth workers. Together, they represent a myriad of possibilities and point to organizations that identify the assets that both youth and youth workers bring to the profession:

- intentionally recruit a diverse representation of youth workers in order to best reflect different populations reached;
- create multiple approaches to ensuring that youth workers feel and are valued for the work they do, including providing ongoing skill development, support, encouragement, and respect; and
- provide a flexible environment that accommodates and rewards frontline youth workers for the complex and demanding work they do, and ensures voice in decisions that effect their day to day work environment.

These seem rather obvious strategies at times, however once found in more settings may alleviate the overworked, under compensated, and unskilled challenges facing the arena of the frontline youth worker.



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