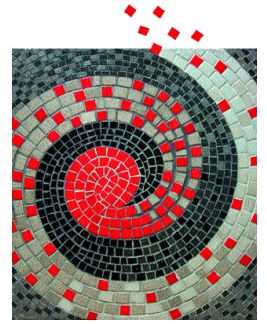


View Staff as Partners in Decision Making



Don Scott

Methodist Children's Home

***“ ... most people
want to be part
of something
worthwhile, and
will become
more involved
when they feel
they are key
players in
that effort”.***

EMPHASIZE INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS

At Methodist Children's Home in Waco, Texas, successful recruitment and retention of high quality direct care staff is the result of emphasizing individual strengths and promoting a participatory work environment. They believe that most of the staff they hire want to feel that they are not only part of, but also have an opportunity to actively participate in, an organization that fosters the positive development of youth. As a result, turnover among direct care staff is minimal, with many individuals working for this organization until they retire.

The strengths-based assets model of care, which was first implemented in 1995, emphasizes the strengths of both staff and youth. This model views staff and youth as active participants and “partners” in planning, making decisions, and evaluating programs. As a result, the general mind-set within the facility is one of joint involvement and responsibility rather than an “everyone for themselves” attitude. While it took some time to change the old established views of youth as “clients” to one of youth and staff as “partners”, over the past four years there have been marked changes among staff in terms of increased retention and commitment to the facility and its programs. Likewise, youth have displayed more enthusiasm for program participation and problem behavior has decreased dramatically. For example, the number of youth needing to be restrained has decreased from over 80 per year to less than 20

per year, and youth running away from the facility has decreased from 40–50 per year to less than 10 per year since the organization started using the strengths-based approach.

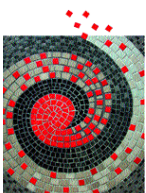
A VOICE IN DECISION MAKING

Working with youth in this way models the way that the entire organization respects both staff and youth voice. Youth have opportunities to be elected to or voluntarily join student organizations such as student councils, advisory councils, and special interest organizations. Youth lead the meetings and, together with the staff sponsors, have decision making authority. Youth representatives also meet weekly with program and administrative staff, and once a quarter the program administrator meets with the entire council. There are plans in place to start a central committee of the youth leaders from each of the existing youth committees, and will meet primarily for planning.

For direct care staff, there are opportunities to be part of the Staff Council that meets with the agency President, as well as serving on other committees such as education, residential programs, community relationships and development. These committees meet at least monthly, but sometimes weekly depending on how the strategic plan is advancing.

INVOLVE IN RECRUITMENT

Finding minority staff, particularly those who are bilingual and who can effectively work with at-risk youth, is a challenge in recruiting qualified and competent youth workers. To meet this challenge, Methodist Children's Home uses bilingual newspapers and websites to advertise staff positions. They also partner with community organizations like the Mexican-American and Black Chambers of Commerce in sponsoring multi-cultural workshops. By doing this they are able to promote awareness of their program needs among minority community members, as well as establishing a good presence in the community. Also, since Methodist Children's Home administration recognizes the importance of networking in the community, the organization pays



membership dues in a community service organization of the individual staff members' choice, and gives staff one hour off per week (with pay) to do community service.

Another strategy that has been successful in recruiting and retaining qualified staff is involving current staff in the interview process. Prospective youth workers are first interviewed and screened by supervisory staff. Emphasis during the interview is placed on explaining the strengths based assets model so that clear expectations of the direct care staff position are established early. Once applicants have been chosen for further consideration, they are taken into the units to observe youth programs and talk with current staff about the facility and their work. This gives applicants an opportunity to gain a more realistic picture of what they can expect and what will be expected of them before accepting the position.

***Methodist Children's Home**, which is a private non-profit organization in Waco, Texas, operates two facilities for youth: a 180 bed residential facility for boys and girls with behavioral and emotional disorders, and a 50 bed ranch outside of Waco for boys with more severe conduct disorders. Referrals to these programs come through school officials, families, child protective services, and juvenile probation services, but neither is a "locked" facility. One hundred seventy-five full-time and eleven part-time direct care staff implement the programs offered at the facilities. Forty-eight percent of the staff are African-American, 47% are white (non-Hispanic/Latino), and 5% are Hispanic/Latino. Direct care staff are required to have at least a high school education and some experience working with at-risk youth prior to their employment. Salaries at Methodist Children's Home are comparable with other youth organizations in Waco, but lower than most other types of jobs available in the area. As a result, some direct care staff work second jobs.*

