



# Recommendations for Moving Forward

***“We should all be asking: ‘How can we all work together to achieve the common good?’”***

— Faith-Based Youth Worker

**E**ven with the challenges and the relative lack of knowledge about what models may already exist, participants in this work expressed widespread interest in building bridges to provide professional development opportunities across sectors. The recommendations are relevant for a range of audiences. Whether you work on the local level and can begin the dialogue and work across faith-based and community youth organizations; as a local intermediary want to begin to work across the organizations; as a national organization that wants to begin to look at the broader picture of the workforce; or a funder who sees the need and opportunity to increase this work across these two important sectors that work with youth there is work that is recommended and can be done.

When asked for their recommendations and hopes for the future, participants in the surveys, focus groups and national convening articulated a range of ideas. Throughout these recommendations you will find overlap with:

- The need to increase the dialogue and work on the local level;
- to take action and to increase our knowledge;
- to define and develop our language and share stories for common understanding of the work; and
- to create environments built on trust and communication.

## Focus on—and Engage—Young People

***“Set aside personal agendas and focus on youth.”*** – Survey Respondent

It almost goes without saying that all youth workers care about youth. However, as we focus attention on developing strong systems to support youth workers, people can easily get caught up in the systems and fear of the unknown and forget the ultimate goal: positive outcomes for our children and youth.

A consistent theme we heard throughout this process is that the best place to begin finding common ground is to focus on young people and their capacities, hopes, realities, challenges, and dreams. Understanding the needs of young people and how we might best meet these needs is certainly a reason for trying to work together instead of in silos in order to do this work most effectively.

As we already know, further dialogue about effective youth work must include more front-line youth workers as well as young people’s own perspectives and voices. The work ahead will only be effective when both groups are directly involved in the conversation and implementation of finding common ground and laying out an agenda for youth worker preparation and support. Only bringing all the stakeholders together will make this a movement with momentum and power.

## Begin or Expand Work Locally

*“I do think we need more research, but I think we can learn and act at the same time. By acting and learning together, we can learn a lot.”*

– Community-Based Youth Worker

*“I hope that we can create a model for collaboration and dialog that would help other groups do the same thing.”* – Survey Respondent

Think about the work collectively as working for youth as a part of the same community. Youth are at the synagogue, mosque, temple and church while they are also at the local Y’s, Boys and Girls Clubs, Parks and Rec programs, 4-H and Scouts. Begin thinking about working together, often for the same population while learning more about the youth being served and expanding those numbers together. The real challenges and potential will only become evident when activity happens on the ground among youth workers from different backgrounds and sectors. Only then will we be able to make the following observations:

- Which of the potential benefits emerge as key?
- What barriers disappear as relationships form?
- What other barriers become significant, persistent challenges?
- What ground rules and practices create safe and stimulating space for learning for everyone?

Throughout our exploratory process, thought leaders, focus group participants, and survey respondents all recommended working locally. Some ideas include:

- **Build relationships and communicate openly.** Find or create opportunities to get to know each other, build trust, and develop partnerships. Keep an open mind, being nonjudgmental and discussing commonalities while not ignoring the differences. Integrate each other’s strengths into respective work with youth. Build a growing understanding between the two communities of youth workers. *Respect, compassion, listening, understanding* and *tolerance* were all words used.
- **Create places and spaces.** Develop the places and spaces where youth workers across systems and sectors can come together to share, define, reflect and develop practice strategies for promoting holistic development and deliberately promote the spiritual and moral development of children and youth.
- **Work for shared understanding and goals.** Have honest and open communication about differing goals. Determining shared goals includes establishing and communicating them together. Discuss belief systems and share and reflect on the differences and similarities of those belief systems. Dialogue openly with each other as well as ensure self-reflection to find those opportunities for common ground.
- **Share knowledge and opportunities.** Provide an opportunity for workers to get together and share what they are doing. Conduct joint trainings, workshops, and events. Share resources, best practices, program ideas, activities, and curriculum (including professional development curriculum).

## Create a Framework for Moral and Spiritual Development

Young people struggle with their own identity particularly during adolescence. Adults who work with them have an important responsibility to be able to help them dialogue and explore the many facets of who they are as human beings. This includes their moral, ethical, and spiritual facets. Since both faith-based and community youth organizations are concerned with the development of children and youth, they are in a position to work together to address these multiple aspects of a young person. The language that is used and the major focus of work may be different, but, we may also find more similarities than differences as we expand our partnerships together. The framework needs to:

- **Determine how moral and ethical development relate to spiritual and religious development.** Develop definitions, narratives, and safe places where youth workers in all settings can create more intentional dialogues about these issues with each other and with young people.
- **Support youth workers to be better prepared to have these hard discussions.** Assist youth workers in developing knowledge and skills for responding to youth questions and concerns related to sensitive issues. Empower youth workers so that they feel prepared and comfortable in responding in ways that support youths' development.
- **Find shared meaning through narratives.** Remember that abstract definitions may do less to stimulate shared commitments than would shared experiences, stories, narratives, and actions. People will create meaning through these shared stories. Through stories and narratives, the work will come alive and have meaning for youth workers. Through action, it will become part of who they are.

While looking more broadly and across the sectors to find common ground, it is important that the particular priorities, issues, and challenges of specific groups not be marginalized or ignored. Within each of the sectors, there are a broad range of racial/ethnic, religious, geographic, gender, type of community, and other particularities for both young people and youth workers. The challenge is to find the creative interplay between what is held in common and what is unique. Furthermore, it is important to support the specific work needed in a particular community, culture, or tradition while also finding bridges and connections between that work and the broader community.

## Integrate the Discussion about Qualifications and Preparation

*“How do we create a movement of peaceful pluralism? I think we have the right pieces, the ten competencies plus two.” – Faith-Based Youth Worker*

Both faith-based and community-based youth organizations are discussing and deciding about what is most needed to prepare highly skilled staff and volunteers to work with youth. The discussions are happening in local organizations and religious institutions; in local intermediaries and networks; on college and university campuses; and on the national level. Based on the information collected, there are clear areas of common ground around core youth worker competencies and shared commitments, at least on the surface. Yet this project only began to scratch the surface of the definitions, assumptions, and best practices available for

exploration. For example, whom are we talking about when we use the term “youth worker”? Is it just the professional, or does it include volunteers? What does it mean to empower youth, to communicate effectively or to work with them in ways that support asset building—the widely endorsed competencies?

Participants in this project identified a number of areas where more work needs to be done collectively to find common language and think about how we may move forward together as we think about the preparation of staff and volunteers who work with youth:

- **Create definitions, common language, and understanding together.** For example, define what it means to be a youth worker, who youth workers are and their roles in various settings, from informal to formal
- **Define successful work with youth.** Work together across sectors to generate a definition and indicators of what successful work with youth looks like. This can lead to a clearer sense of the common ground. Identify general practice or program standards.
- **Deepen the work on core competencies.** Develop a deeper interpretation and application of the core competencies by providing tips and strategies for strengthening each competency and creating additional competencies that may need to be added for a particular community. Explore the competencies in both faith-based and community-based youth organizations to ensure their relevancy to multiple populations.
- **Understand more about professional development.** Define the current quality, quantity, and content of training, technical assistance, and other learning opportunities within each sector and across sectors. Include pre-service training as well as in-servicing training.
- **Develop together credentials, certificates and degrees.** Look across the campus to see what is already occurring to prepare those who work with youth and think about inter-departmental work. Research existing degrees to find out if they are relevant and available to both faith-based and community youth workers and see if it is beneficial to expand the audience intentionally.

## Conduct Additional Research

The need for additional knowledge and research is woven throughout the recommendations. In addition, to keep this work moving forward, research agendas should be designed in order to learn more about the common ground between faith-based and community-based organizations. The following are a few ideas that have already surfaced:

- **Learn more about youth workers.** Create an in-depth profile of youth workers with nationally representative samples that include youth workers from multiple sectors and settings. This work can build on an existing study and protocol done by the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition of front-line youth workers ([www.nextgencoalition.org](http://www.nextgencoalition.org)).
- **Explore the relevance of contexts, particularly nature.** Some contexts, such as the nature-based setting of many camp experiences, may be particularly important for certain aspects of youth development. Explore how specific contexts, such as nature, may impact positive youth development and how youth workers can be trained to facilitate these impacts.

## Develop Practical Tools

*“I think I got the theology right and I understand a lot about spiritual formation, but I don’t feel like I understand a lot about the other aspects about youth.”*

–Faith-Based Youth Worker

To do this work, people will need hands-on tools, many of which may emerge most effectively from local innovations and experiments. These tools may include the following:

- **Create a tool kit.** Provide the tools that help youth workers understand spiritual development and moral/ethical development. Find common space for youth worker dialogue about spiritual development and moral development and then ways to apply what they learn into their specific setting.
- **Develop the needed materials.** Develop the people, practices, exercises, resources, Web, and print materials that would be used at local workshops and conferences so that these ideas and goals can spread through existing networks.
- **Recommend a beginning bibliography.** Identify the essential literature that should be read by youth workers in both sectors that can become a shared knowledge base about young people, adolescent development, and best practices related to the core competencies of youth workers (see Appendix G).

## Tap into Existing Models and Networks

*“Don’t reinvent the wheel; if there are programs/organizations out there that provide services or will train staff/volunteers, they should use them.”*

– Survey Respondent

The national thought leaders recommended that we find examples of cross-sector training and professional development and capture the lessons already learned. Some of this information was already provided by survey respondents when they were asked to identify places and organizations that already offer “professional development opportunities, systems, or frameworks” that build bridges between faith-based and community-based youth-serving organizations. Some of the suggestions were relevant to both audiences, but may not be doing intentional work to bridge these two groups and may be key places to begin capturing lessons. (See Appendix C for a list of the various organizations named.) These included:

- Existing systems and practices that focus on both faith-based and community-based youth workers (e.g., American Camp Association)
- Local, state, or regional intermediaries, networks, coalitions and alliances
- Community-based asset-building efforts or coalitions
- Faith-based and interfaith/multi-denominational efforts

- Issue-oriented social justice and advocacy networks
- National community-based organizations
- Foundation- and government-initiated efforts

In short, find the examples of cross-sector training to capture lessons learned. There may be many organizations, particularly at the local level, that are doing innovative work that touches on the possibilities for cross-sector professional development. Some of those models are intentionally cross-sector; others are cross-sector simply because of who is involved and the nature of the community. Finding and learning from these examples provides an experiential foundation for future collaboration.

## **Begin the Conversations . . . and the Experiments**

This exploratory project begins to lay out an agenda for dialogue and action aimed at strengthening youth work practice in both community-based and faith-based settings. Yet, in many ways, it is only a start—like the greeting and introductions in a long, significant conversation. It appears that we have something to talk about together, and people who have been engaged in this process have appreciated the invitation and the “space” to have these conversations.

Our hope is that these conversations will continue, be deepened, and spread to other people, settings, and networks. Frameworks and questions presented in this publication may be springboards for exploratory dialogues and new relationships.

There is also a sense, though, that the conversation will only get us so far. It’s easy, for example, to spend so much time on the barriers and challenges of cross-sector engagement that you lose perspective on what really happens when people of good will come together for shared learning and action. It’s easy to forget about what you can do individually and together to support and engage young people in your organizations and communities. These conversations and learnings can lead to important new shared activities and actions—on-the-ground experiences based in relationships where trust, mutual respect, and shared stories can grow.

There is energy, enthusiasm, and much work to do to build these bridges. All of us together can make the difference. Join us in being catalytic in finding common ground.