

YOUTH WORK COALITION

August 2007

THE GOAL of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition is to help achieve its vision of a strong, valued youth work profession through documentation, education and communications activities and by serving as a locus for joint action and collaboration within the field. We believe this entails progress in five key areas:

- Standards and competencies
- Professional development and training resources
- Learning delivery systems
- Career ladders and compensation guidelines
- Research and evaluation systems

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The Next Generation Youth Work Coalition brings together individuals and organizations dedicated to developing a strong, diverse youth work workforce that is stable, prepared, supported and committed to the well-being and empowerment of young people.

This edition of the Next Gen Bulletin takes a somewhat different approach, focusing specifically on lessons we can learn from the United Kingdom about recruiting, retaining and supporting youth workers. To begin, Deborah Craig and Elaine Johnson, who attended the U.K.'s Community Youth Worker Union Conference this May as representatives of the Next Gen Coalition share observations from their trip. Their article outlines some key commonalities and differences between youth work in the U.S and the U.K. and reflects on what elements of the U.K. model could be adapted for our work here. As always, there is an article written by a youth worker, in this case, Mandy Revel from the U.K. In addition, Joyce Walker offers an opportunity to learn from the history of youth work at home and abroad, and Michael Heathfield offers his perspective on recent changes in the youth work system in the U.K.

U.K. Youth Workers, First Hand

By Deborah Craig, *YouthNet* and Elaine Johnson, *National Training Institute for Community Youth Work/AED*

Not unlike the United States, the United Kingdom struggles to demonstrate the effectiveness of youth work and has insufficient funding to provide a full range of activities and supports for young people. Beyond those two primary commonalities, however, the youth work field appears to have evolved very differently in the U.K. and the U.S. Here we reflect on some of the key differences, based on our recent experience participating in the CYWU conference in Scotland this spring.

Identity as Youth Workers

As is the case in the United States, in the U.K. there are many different types of youth workers and a variety of job descriptions. At the U.K. conference, however, it was clear that participants thoroughly identified themselves as youth workers, and that this term implies a strong core identity and set of responsibilities that cut across various jobs and roles. A shared sense of pride and commitment to the profession, which originated 121 years ago, was evident among the youth workers who attended the conference.

Age Focus

Unlike in the United States, where school-age youth work (elementary) is more organized and recognized, youth work in the U.K. focuses primarily on 13 to 19 year olds and is more developed as a profession than school-age work (which in the U.K. is referred to as 'play work').

Centralization

In the U.K., the provision of supports for youth is mandated and funded by the central government. Each local authority is responsible for ensuring supports are available in their community and must report their plans and compliance to the central government. This contrasts significantly with our patchwork of very localized, community-grown programs that are financed by a variety of private, state and federal funding streams.

Qualifications

The U.K. has a set of nationally recognized competencies for youth workers and a centralized system for qualification, which is required regardless of whether a youth worker is employed on a full- or part-time basis. Qualifications can be attained through formal higher education or through a range of community-based trainings, all of which must be approved by a centralized body.

Philosophy

British youth workers tend to talk about the relationships they build with youth, while in the U.S., conversations are often about programs and activities for young people. The standards for youth work (NOS – National Occupational Standards for Youth Work) are replete with the words *with, enable, assist, support* and *respond*. As an example: NOS Unit A: "Build relationships with young people that enable them to explore and make sense of their experiences, plan and take action."

...enabling young people to express their feelings, aspirations and concerns and consider what their developmental needs might be. It is about enabling them to articulate those goals and what support they need from you. It is about enabling young people to order their priorities and identify how youth work activities could help them to achieve their aspirations. (Element A1.2 NOS)

Roles and Delivery Systems

One conference participant we met, Theresa, describes herself as a 'detached youth worker.' Afternoons she is at a center documenting her work activities and completing other administrative requirements. From 5 to 9 pm she conducts her youth work in the community, in places where young people gather, establishing relationships and rapport with young people who will not participate in building-based youth clubs. In the U.K., youth work happens in the following contexts:

Projects- with particular groups of young people e.g. young women, various ethnic groups;

Specialist Projects- focus on specific activities such as volunteering or the arts;

Mobile Units- converted buses and other vehicles that take youth workers to particular localities; and

Youth Forums or Councils- assisting young people to learn about the democratic process.

In whatever setting youth work takes place the focus is establishing relationships that enable young people to explore, make sense of their experiences, plan and take action. Because the focus is on supporting the young people with whom they engage, national mandates and standards in no way ‘standardize,’ ‘prescribe,’ or dehumanize young people. Youth work is localized, organic and authentic.

Collective Bargaining

The U.K. does have a union for youth workers—the Community and Youth Work Union, but only about 10% of youth workers are actually union members. Recently, the CYWU has become a part of the T & G Union (Transportation and General Workers) in order to increase their funds, hire additional staff and, therefore, increase their ability to focus on membership recruitment.

A primary accomplishment of unionizing over the years has been its impact on pay and benefits. Pay scales are standardized across the country. The “Pay and Conditions Committee,” made up of employers and youth workers is a standing union committee. As Mandy shared with us in her interview, she gets 40 days off a year, a local government pension, health benefits, death benefits and other benefits such as reduced car insurance, credit union access and gym benefits.

Articulated Values

Equity and social justice are clearly articulated values of the youth work profession in the U.K. Equity and justice are defined very broadly and in terms of young people, e.g. their access to quality education, employment opportunities and other community resources. In addition, the Community and Youth Worker Union takes positions on other issues such as nuclear disarmament and foreign policy because of their effects on young people.

YOUTH WORK WORKFORCE GOALS

Stable:

Reduce turnover by improving recruitment, increasing rewards, expanding career paths.

Prepared:

Increase preparation by providing multiple opportunities and delivery systems.

Supported:

Increase job satisfaction and performance by addressing needs for recognition, supervision, training and professional development and work/life balance.

Committed:

Increase youth benefits by making the values, principles and goals of youth work clear and rewarding those who demonstrate them regularly in practice.

Adopting or adapting elements of the British model

Does the United States have an intentionally defined, common youth work model? At this point in time, we believe the answer is 'no'. We can describe the work with young people taking place in various communities. We have national organizations with their own curricula, job descriptions and pay scales. There are a variety of styles of working with young people with multiple goals and outcomes which have developed in response to emerging social issues over the years, or perceived youth problems. Here are questions to consider as we move forward and consider adopting or adapting lessons from the U.K.:

How can we think about centralization in the context of the United States?

We doubt that the U.S. government will ever exercise the degree of central control over how states and localities approach youth work as is manifested in the U.K. Centralization. It is not our history and is viewed by many Americans as inherently socialistic. A more realistic parallel might be to think about how policies and programs that are "national" in the U.K. countries might inform work at the state level in the U.S. Similarly, we think it is relatively logical to conclude that establishing a youth work union is not in the cards. The conflicts that unionizing would engender would greatly overshadow and distract from the work we wish to do with young people.

Can we agree on a common set of national occupational standards, such as those established by the Department of Labor, Office of Apprenticeship and Training?

A great deal of work on core competencies is now underway at the state and local levels, especially for elementary or school-age workers. Can we distill those competencies that should be common to all, allowing localities to add additional competencies specific to their communities as they see fit? What is the process for agreeing on a nationally recognized set of competencies? Who would be the group to decide upon them? While we are far from endorsing one national set of competencies, many in the field of youth work in the United States are signing on to a common definition of youth work and looking to establish more common ground; the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition is the latest iteration of these efforts.

Should we consider re-orienting youth work practice to focus on relationships first with activities growing organically out of those relationships, or do we wish to continue offering externally determined developmental activities, then focus on reaching out to youth to participate?

Would funders, public or private, be willing to fund the British model? And again, what is the process? What body decides?

Should youth workers and/or youth organizations in the U.S. more intentionally articulate core values related to things like equity and social justice?

We may be able to agree on values, perhaps even equity and social justice issues, at least as they relate directly to the young people we engage. However, any organization in whatever U.S. industry that would take positions on broad social issues or international politics would need to be prepared to rely on a non-government funding base, since taking such positions could influence its ability to raise funds.

Interview with Mandy Revel

Tell us a little bit about yourself and where you live.

Mandy Revel, 38 years of age, I work in Sutton-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire home of the Robin Hood Legend and the ‘Major’ Oak”—Robin Hood hideout in the heart of Sherwood Forest. There are approximately 20,000 people who live in Ashfield.

Did you hear about the profession of youth work when you grew up? If so, how?

I heard about the profession of youth work through my local ‘Good News’ club which was associated with our local church—it was smashing!

Why did you decide to go into youth work? How did you enter the profession?

I decided to go into youth work after having my own children and going to college on a ‘Woman’s Returner course.’ It was really a choice between youth work and social work. I chose youth work after volunteering in our local youth centre of which I am now the Manager—how cool is that! I went onto University to attain a qualification in youth work.

In what kind of setting do you work?

I work in a youth centre with 13–19 years olds. Really hard work. My centre also accommodates our local school at break times and lunch times and young people have their dinner here.

What position do you currently hold and what do you do on a typical work day, if there is such a thing!

I am the Manager of the youth centre and team leader of 13 staff members who work daytime and evenings. My typical day consists of face to face work in the centre lunchtimes and breaks and then in the evenings for youth club. I also have to pen push—the admin side of it, which I hate! Youth club stuff is much more fun. No two days are the same as issue after issue arises and I sometimes have to ‘fire fight’ to get through the day!

What do you like most about being a youth worker?

I LOVE being a youth worker as I get to speak to loads of young people from all walks of life, with a variety of abilities, disabilities and social backgrounds – no day is the same! What I love the most is the interaction and the achievements young people reach—it makes me very proud to have worked alongside of them, positively motivating and supporting them.

What challenges do you face?

One challenge I face day in and day out, and frustratingly so, is the lack of funding—young people identify what they’d like to be involved in then I have to source funding and more often than not bang my head against a brick wall! One of our targeted pieces of work is to come and visit you all in your town and look at our differences and work together on bringing this world and our own environments closer together.

Another challenge, and more prominently so, is the failing education system we have in this country and the lack of knowledge and skills that young people come out with when they leave school. Then young people are at a loss on what to do which is where we come in and support with engaging activities etc!

Other challenges are the meeting of targets set by the government! Arhh very frustrating when all we want to do is pro-active work with young people!

Do you see yourself being a youth worker for your entire working life?

I do consider myself being a youth worker for the foreseeable future—probably for the rest of my life! If not I would love to be a PHSE teacher—Personal, Health & Social Education.

What kind of employment benefits do you receive as a youth worker?

The benefits of being a youth worker? I get 40 days off a year holiday, local government pension, sickness benefits, death benefits (although I obviously wouldn't benefit), cheaper car insurance, credit union benefits, gym benefits, retirement plans—its good working here!

NOTABLE PROJECTS OR EVENTS

Historical Perspectives about Youth and Community Work

Joyce Walker, *University of Minnesota*

To remedy the absence of readily accessible historical perspectives about youth and community work, interested youth workers and university scholars in the United Kingdom are actively documenting the stories of influential people, prominent organizations and significant movements that have shaped the youth work field today. They're writing their own history!

Since 2001, researchers and practitioners have come together to share lively and creative presentations and workshops at the History of Community and Youth Work Conference in Durham. When the 2007 conference presentations are published by the National Youth Agency, there will be four volumes of field-generated commentary documenting historical perspectives of personal leadership, organizational influence and policy initiatives.

In June 2008, the University of Minnesota will sponsor its second international Conference on the History of Youth & Community Work. Modeled on the Durham conferences, interested participants come together to share historical research, interviews, stories and perspectives that teach us who we are and where we come from as a field. The 2008 U.S. conference presentations will be published in the fifth history volume. Save the last weekend in June 2008—and check out the website (soon to be updated) at www.historyconference.org.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

U.K. Youth Services - A Time of Great Change

Michael Heathfield, *Harold Washington College*

Over the past few years some significant structural changes have impacted the youth work field in the United Kingdom. These have all been driven by central government, but have had the most impact at local government levels where decisions about youth work delivery are made. The fact that these changes are centrally driven is typically European, and reminds us here in the U.S. that whatever workforce development issues we are working on, it is essential we generate the political will necessary to make real change happen in support of youth workers and the essential work they do.

Emphasis on Coordination

All of these changes are driven by an outcome focus: wanting all children and youth to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being. At the local level, all adults involved in the lives of children and youth are brought together to negotiate, strategize and work on delivery plans to show how they will contribute to achieving these outcomes. So youth services, schools, hospitals, police, probation, social services, and the not-for-profit sector—all are now asked to coordinate and collaborate in achieving improved outcomes for children and youth.

Young people will still have programs, activities and places to go to hang out safely. There is also a strong focus on integrated youth support and development and the provision of accessible information, advice and guidance. This is intended to deliver much greater coordination of targeted and specialized services to ensure all youth have a chance for achieving equality in the key outcomes, but reflects a different frame of reference than the more typical 'equality of opportunity' approach.

Involving Children and Youth

In the government policies that created these changes (Every Child Matters, Youth Matters, Youth Matters – Next Steps) it is clear that children and youth have an entitlement to quality programs. In fact, local government has a legal obligation to consult with children and youth about the services, supports and opportunities they would like to see in their local area. We are far from this approach here in the U.S., but it reminds me of a great phrase coined by the disability movement here in Chicago, 'nothing about us without us'.

Youth Worker Roles

Workforce requirements and qualifications are also changing. A new job of 'youth support worker' has been created, as the professional requirements for qualified youth workers have been increased. By 2010 youth work will be a degree profession and qualified worker

Definition of a Youth Worker

A youth worker is an individual who works with and on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social, and educational development and enable them to gain a voice, influence, and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence.

status will only be attached to degrees. At the same time, the curriculum for youth worker education is being revisited and the national occupational standards are being re-written to account for the new professional demands on youth workers.

Youth Worker Qualifications

The whole national qualification framework is being redesigned and coordinated to bring coherence across all the separate professional domains and fields working with children and young people. This is part of the desire to build a “world-class workforce for children, young people and families” by 2010. All of these initiatives can be followed and policy documents downloaded by visiting the National Youth Agency web site ([HYPERLINK "http://www.nya.org.uk"](http://www.nya.org.uk)).

Lesson for the United States

So what can we learn from all of this activity and change? Perhaps one of the most critical and most applicable lessons is the fact that our workforce development efforts must be driven by the needs and outcomes of young people themselves. Looking beyond our small and emerging domain requires us to lift our heads, engage in dialogue with youth, and add their voices to our efforts to ensure they receive the best possible supports and opportunities to reach happy, healthy and productive adulthood.



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