

Collaborative Adventures



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Moving from Youth Guided to Youth Driven Care

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“Authentic youth involvement in a System of Care Community permeates the community and is actualized through the meaningful involvement of young people in each level of system of care development.” – Youth Involvement in Systems of Care; Making it Happen

Young people have the ability to create significant change and to cause others to make change. This time of year we remember Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. On April 12, 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama thousands of young people got up and left their classrooms in the middle of the day to gather at the 76th Street Baptist Church. Young people secretly organized what has become known as “D-Day” without the use of cell phones, Facebook, internet or text messaging. Nine hundred seventy-three youth were jailed because of their effort to bring their message to the forefront, which ultimately brought about significant change.

Youth with mental health challenges have for years been rendered invisible, and their unique capabilities in determining what works for them has historically been marginalized. Youth guided means that young people have the right to be empowered, educated, and given a decision making role in the care of their own lives as well as the policies and procedures governing care for all youth in the community, state and nation. The power of youth participation helps to rebuild the community, fosters resiliency, and combats stigma around mental illness.

In 1988, Barbara Huff along with a host of other family activists began developing a formal mechanism for family voice through the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health (FFCMH). This initiative paved the way for the subsequent youth movement with the understanding that advancing the cause for families requires an understanding and commitment to the values around youth involvement. This concept has gained significant momentum by such organizations as the Children’s Defense Fund, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and The Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program. Many of these organizations now require that young people with a serious emotional disturbance who have systematically been denied the opportunity to share in their home, community, and educational life have a “voice” in each system that serves them as well as the services and supports they receive. Human serving organizations are recognizing more and more that participation is key in the development of a social conscience and social responsibility.

The willingness to have youth involvement at annual conferences has helped youth educate more young people, families and professionals on the value of youth involvement, engagement, and empowerment. After the first day of the Surgeon General’s Conference on Child Mental Health in 2000, youth who felt they were being disrespected, unwelcome or tokenized made a decision to take action. Like the young people in Birmingham, these young people organized and decided not to attend the conference the following day unless they were authentically listened to. Their absence was noticed; in fact it left a void. They then presented a manifesto asking parents and professionals to treat them with respect and dignity. The plea was simple, “Nothing About Us Without Us!”

Today thousands of organizations are recognizing the value in authentic youth voice as demonstrated via youth conferences, youth planned conferences/events, presence on policy & planning committees and publications. Young people need a network of adults who are leading change agents and decision makers and are also willing to “authentically” involve and support them. Both youth and adults need to recognize the strengths, interests, experiences, and power the other brings to the table.

Young people can:

- Accept responsibility for creating social change
- Develop the competencies and skills to make it happen
- Identify social concerns and develop methods to address those concerns
- Develop, initiate, and organize projects that respond to personal needs as well as the needs of their peers and their community

Young people need youth development opportunities in order to transition successfully into adulthood and to enhance the quality of services they receive. Youth development and youth involvement are interlinking concepts.

Additional Resources:

FAN (Family Action Network of Lake County) – call or e-mail:

<http://www.lakenetnw.net/member/familyactionnetwork/>

<http://youthmove.us/>

<http://ysa.org/>

<http://systemsofcare.samhsa.gov/headermenus/youthguided.aspx>