



Community-Based Organizations Can Promote Adolescent Health

Healthy communities are dependent on healthy people. Although most of the nation's nearly 42 million adolescents (aged 10-19) are healthy, far too many young people participate in risky behavior, develop unhealthy habits, are overweight or obese, have mental health or substance abuse problems, or have serious or chronic conditions that jeopardize their health. These conditions and activities in adolescence set the behaviors and habits—healthy or unhealthy—for adulthood.

Disease prevention, early intervention, and timely treatment can significantly improve the health status of adolescents, prepare them to become healthy adults, and decrease the incidence of many chronic diseases in adulthood.

Community-based organizations—whether they are focused specifically on health or on broader community issues—can play critical roles in providing a coordinated approach to care for adolescents. They can offer assistance in preventing risky behaviors, as well as in promoting healthy behavior and development. They can offer an accessible, equitable source of health information and services to the young people who are at greatest risk of unhealthy behaviors or who have difficulty gaining access to primary care services.

Public and private community-based organizations include independent local programs, local affiliates of national organizations, and faith-based organizations, as well as school-based programs that offer after-school, community service, school-to-work transition, arts, sports, and recreation, mentoring, scouting, and other activities.

Community-Based Programs Part of Coordinated Approach

Comprehensive community-based health clinics and facilities that are focused on adolescents provide ideal settings for disease prevention and health promotion services. These kinds of facilities should be encouraged and supported. However, in the many communities that do not have such facilities, other community-based organizations can provide services to adolescents in many different ways.



"I think everyone deserves access to quality treatment. It was a horrible time for me [before I got the care I needed], but I was able to recover. I'm going to school to become an art therapist."

Shawn has a bi-polar condition and lived periodically in foster care or the care of her mother and grandmother.

When she was struggling to get her illness under control, she faced periods without any treatment and periods of being overmedicated.

Community-based support helped Shawn discover her path to recovery with counseling from her local social services agency, and she is now in control of her life.

For example, community-based organizations whose primary focus is employment, child welfare, family preservation, child and after-school care, transportation, or youth development can all teach or support healthy habits and behaviors in adolescents. Caring adult leaders and supportive peers in these programs can model healthy behaviors and offer caring, nurturing environments. These organizations can also help refer adolescents to primary care health settings for support.

A key to improving health services for adolescents is recognizing adolescence as a critical and unique stage of development: adolescents are not “big children” or “little adults.” Services for them can be provided at the group or individual level, or they can be family-focused. The services should be tailored to an adolescent’s own environment: health care providers, health organizations, and community-based programs need to develop coordinated, linked, and interdisciplinary services for the specific needs of adolescents.

The Principles of Youth Development

A framework for understanding adolescents identified in previous work from the National Academies* describes healthy development through four domains: physical development, intellectual development, psychological and emotional development, and social development. It further identifies features of youth settings—physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive

relationships; opportunities to belong; skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts that clearly support healthy development. These program features offer a useful set of goals for community-based organizations as they seek to improve disease prevention and health promotion services for adolescents.

Community-based organizations that incorporate these youth development features can complement, and sometimes even substitute for, problem-based disease prevention and treatment programs, especially for substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and risky sexual activity. The youth development framework may also be translated to particular circumstances of health settings.

Key Facts

- Community-based organizations should incorporate health promotion, disease prevention, and youth development in their services for adolescents.
- A coordinated approach to adolescent health should involve both health-specific programs and other community-based activities.
- Youth development principles universally applied to programs serving adolescents can promote adolescent health.

* National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth. J. Eccles and J. A. Gootman (Eds). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

For More Information

This summary was prepared by the Institute of Medicine/ National Research Council, based on the report, *Adolescent Health Services: Missing Opportunities*, and the DVD produced in conjunction with that report, both of which were products of the IOM/NRC Committee on Adolescent Health Services. Copies of the report are available for sale from the National Academies Press (NAP) at 888-624-8373 or 202-334-3313 or via the NAP homepage www.nap.edu. Full text of the report and a free PDF copy of the Summary are also available at www.nap.edu. The DVD can be viewed at www.bocyf.org/ahc.html.

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