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## ***Multiple Strategies for Reaching At-Risk Youth*** Used by the Madison, Wisconsin, School-Community Recreation Department<sup>1</sup>

*Presenter:*

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### **Background**

Under provision of enabling legislation created by the state of Wisconsin in 1911, community recreation services have been provided by the Madison School District since 1926. Public park lands, facilities, and services are provided by the city of Madison through a municipal parks division.

In November 1982 the Madison School-Community Recreation Department (MSCR) published its *Action Plan for the 1980s: Perspectives on Programs, Projections for Progress* which included the following mission statement:

- (1) to provide year-round recreation opportunities which are accessible to all residents of the Madison Metropolitan School District, responding to expressed interests and making maximum use of all available resources in the school district;
- (2) to educate community citizens, with emphasis on children and youth of school age, on the value of learning and practicing lifetime leisure skills and appreciations; and
- (3) to serve as a community resource and catalyst for recreation services: providing referral information, organizational expertise and planning with other agencies, organizations and citizen groups in order to more fully meet the recreational needs of all community residents.

Goals and objectives were developed to help achieve this mission. Two update reports were

published in 1985 and 1988, and included information on goal and objective achievement.

In the early 1990s it became clear that the city (population approximately 200,000) and school district were becoming more urban in character. The school district had 25% minority enrollment, with 58% of African Americans, 55% of Asians, and 43% of Hispanics classified as low-income. Of 57 census tracts in the city, seven had between 23% and 30% below the poverty level, and another seven had between 11% and 18% below the poverty level.

MSCR staff and department advisory committee members held planning retreats to identify what came to be known as the *MSCR 2000 Mission Focus*. This statement indicates that MSCR will:

- (1) *focus* its resources on improving services to school-age youth, families, low-income, minority, and disabled residents, while maintaining quality adult programs;
- (2) *expand* outreach and service as a recreation resource and catalyst to individuals, groups, and organizations; and
- (3) *maintain* a tradition of excellence that meets community needs and expectations.

With the support of the advisory committee and board of education, program, service, and budget priorities were reordered to reflect the emphasis of the 2000 Mission Focus. Some administrative staff reorganization was necessary. Programs and services aimed primarily at reaching at-risk youth have been dramatically expanded since 1990. Key strategies for

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<sup>1</sup> Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.  
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increasing success in serving target neighborhoods and constituencies were identified and successfully implemented through the programs, services, and operational procedures employed by the department.

### Identification of Program Strategies

The following strategies were identified to help achieve the overall goals outlined in the 2000 Mission Focus.

**School-based Programs:** MSCR staff have good access to schools and students. Emphasis is primarily on programming in the 29 elementary and ten middle schools, with less emphasis on the four public high schools. Support of school principals is the key to success; they assist with access to “minority achievement funds” and various participation incentives.

**Neighborhood-Based Programs:** Neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income youth are targeted. Parks, schools, and neighborhood and community centers are utilized for a wide variety of programs. Efforts are under way to create more “ownership” of programs by neighborhood associations and other citizen groups.

**Culturally Responsive Activities:** Programs are adapted in response to interests expressed by young people. After-school clubs, sports, music, and other cultural arts reflect the background of the clientele, as well as provide opportunities for them to learn about lifelong activities outside of their everyday experiences.

**Accessible Services:** Accessibility is enhanced by the school board’s “no hassle” fee waiver policy, transportation to programs and to special program events, and the provision of one-to-one participation assistance for youth with special needs who may have emotional, physical, or mental disabilities.

**Employment and Training of Neighborhood Residents:** MSCR has made a practice of hiring and training residents of low-income neighborhoods to work in local programs. In some cases they constitute 75% of the staff. This provides good part-time employment opportunities and helps program participants immediately identify with program leaders.

**Outreach Services:** Besides targeted mailings and “directed word-of-mouth” communication, MSCR employs two regular part-time outreach workers who identify needy families through school social workers and other sources with follow-up phone calls or visits. These outreach workers encourage registration and ongoing participation through the use of fee waivers, provision of transportation, and other creative aids. The Outreach Subcommittee of the department’s 15-member citizen

advisory committee reviews and enhances MSCR’s outreach efforts to target populations.

**Collaboration and Partnerships:** All MSCR programs for at-risk youth involve a high degree of interagency collaboration and/or partnerships with other governmental, civic, not-for-profit, businesses, and corporations. The department places a high priority on establishing and maintaining professional and interpersonal relationships with other community leaders who strive to improve services for at-risk youth.

**New Funding Sources:** MSCR’s 1982 Action Plan officially endorsed an increased level of community fundraising, but not until 1990 did these efforts dramatically increase, especially in support of programs that fit the MSCR 2000 Mission Focus. In fiscal 1993-94, over \$175,000 was raised from individuals, corporations and businesses, foundations, civic organizations, and other governmental entities. For the 1994-95 fiscal year, the goal was \$750,000. There has also been increased federal grant support for at-risk youth programs.

### Key Programs Employing the Strategies

**After-school Recreation:** Efforts are being made to expand the number of elementary schools providing clubs, sports, arts, and special events, with emphasis on schools with high numbers of at-risk youth. All ten middle schools have recreation counselors who employ school staff to lead clubs and intramural sports. Principals typically provide late buses to get kids back home. Elementary-school program attendance is 50 to 150 a day; most middle schoolers sign up for one or more activities during the year.

**AmeriCorps:** A U.S. Justice Department grant (AmeriCorps) to the city of Madison focuses on at-risk youth and provides 30 low-income adults from three target neighborhoods full-time work in schools and recreation programs.

**Art Cart:** MSCR’s mobile summer free arts program is operated collaboratively with the Madison Art Center and stops for one or two days in low-income neighborhoods. It also visits summer day-care groups serving younger at-risk kids. Approximately 2,500 youth are served through its programs.

**Basketball Clinics:** Saturday morning basketball clinics are offered during the winter. Over 300 youth are bused to one of the two program locations.

**CASPER:** An after-school program is offered for homeless children who reside at the Salvation Army shelter. School and MSCR staff jointly plan and run the program which serves 30-80 young people a day.

**Exhibit 15A****Madison Midnight Basketball Program****Purpose**

The purpose of the Madison Midnight Basketball Program is to reach young, at-risk minority males, provide them with role models, and connect them to existing community services. The objectives are twofold: (1) to provide league-format basketball activities on Friday and Saturday nights, especially in the summer, when the target group of young men are most at-risk of drug and alcohol involvement which may lead to involvement in criminal activities; and (2) to successfully link these young men to educational, vocational, and treatment programs which may increase their self-sufficiency and well-being. Through playing basketball, players are encouraged to learn to work together to develop and implement strategies, analyze situations, look out for others, increase leadership ability, discover personal strengths, and gain positive attention from their families and friends. Off-duty police officers are employed as security for each game night.

**Recruitment Criteria**

League activity begins in May when an open player recruitment process is initiated by the team coaches. To be accepted the player must be between the ages of 19 and 29, live within the targeted neighborhoods (i.e., Allied, Bayview, Broadway -Simpson, Darbo-Worthington, Kennedy Heights, Northport, South Madison, Vera Court, Wexford Ridge), and have played less than two years of organized posthigh school basketball.

**Coaches and Team Development**

The teams are developed primarily by street-smart African-American coaches who lead the young men into the summer workshops to meet counselors and role models from community agencies. The coach's role is pivotal: he develops the strengths of the players, builds team cooperation, and through this role, is granted authority to enforce the league rules and pull the players into line if they lose their focus. Additional requirements for all players are: (1) no antisocial activities, and (2) no contact with the criminal justice system.

**Summer Workshops**

Each program participant is required to attend formal workshops focusing on stress management, dealing with alcohol and drug abuse issues, education and employment. The 40-minute sessions are intensive, confrontational, and instructional.

Paul R. Soglin, the Mayor of Madison, stated:

We are constantly striving to improve living conditions in our vulnerable neighborhoods, both for individuals and the community at-large. Midnight Basketball targets a population of young men who are substantially at-risk for substance abuse, criminal involvement, and unemployment, and who are often neglected in our services planning. The program's commitment to provide workshops on education and employment as well as substance abuse, combined with recreational basketball, offers an effective way to challenge and assist these young men to move forward in a positive way. We are particularly pleased that the program has generated support from the business community and service clubs.

Richard K. Williams, Madison Chief of Police, commented:

The Madison Police Department supports and endorses Midnight Basketball as a successful and needed program in our city. Midnight Basketball offers positive programs for young men from our community during hours which they could easily become involved in less productive activities. Through these programs young men learn values which help them become productive citizens and role models in the community.

**Exhibit 15B**

One year ago, Ronald was unemployed and unsure of his next move in life. After moving to Madison in 1990, Ronald enrolled in the University of Wisconsin, but then decided he didn't want to attend school there. Last week, Ronald started his second semester at Madison Area Technical College (MATC) and is studying to become an industrial engineer.

The reason for his turnaround? Ronald was one of 71 young men who played in Madison's first midnight basketball league last summer. "I'm trying to move forward and do a lot of positive things," said Ronald, 20, a Chicago native who lives on Madison's near West Side.

Besides Ronald, at least three other league participants are attending MATC part time and another three have started earning their General Educational Development (GED) diplomas elsewhere. Ronald and Vince, 21, are both enrolled in MATC's General Studies program and playing on MATC's basketball team, the Trojans.

According to the program leaders and a former MATC basketball coach, "Nearly all of the league participants praised the workshops and some have even heeded the advice. It exceeded our expectations."

**Kids Day Out:** On several teacher in-service/conference days each year MSCR, in collaboration with other agencies, provides sports, arts, and environmental education. Professional performers also entertain the youth. From 100 to 300 youth participate at each site, and some programs are underwritten by corporate sponsors.

**Midnight Basketball:** About 70 at-risk young men, 90% African American, participate in a summer league which incorporates a mandatory group counseling program. Role model coaches, including representatives of the police and fire departments and local corporations, provide leadership (see Exhibits 15A and 15B, pages 166-168).

**Playgrounds (Supervised):** A citywide summer playground program at 25 to 30 locations is provided. From 20 to 75 children per day are actively involved in sports and games, crafts, and many special events. In 1995 a "Super Center" program was initiated which provided all-day supervision, sports and swim instruction.

**Safe Haven:** Federal "Weed and Seed" funds provide extensive after-school and summer programs at three elementary schools serving at-risk students. Some of the funds are also used to subcontract with other agencies having centers in high-risk neighborhoods. Daily participation ranges from 40 to over 100 neighborhood youth.

**Saturday Recreation:** Morning drop-in programs at schools in high-risk neighborhoods serve 20-50 young people each session at each site during the coldest winter months. Asian Hmong children participate extensively at one location.

**Sports Camps:** Three summer programs each serve 40-60 youth in high-risk neighborhoods. Emphasis is on sports skill instruction, but the attendees also participate in special events and field trips.

**Swim Instruction:** MSCR's "Grow Our Own" minority aquatics staff development program employs low-income neighborhood adults who register kids for Saturday instruction and then bring them (20-30 per session) by bus to an indoor high-school pool. In the summer, free and reduced-rate group instruction is scheduled for kids from neighborhood centers and MSCR's programs serving at-risk youth.

**Youth Connection:** Dane County Youth Connection, Inc. is a nonprofit teen program affiliated with MSCR, headquartered at MSCR's Downtown Arts and Activities Center. Youth Connection serves hundreds of high school age youth per month, including many low-income, minority, and "punk" youth utilizing countywide multicultural teen council, addiction support groups, weekend dances, cable TV discussion shows and other activities.

### Measurement of Outcomes

While MSCR has yet to implement a department-wide program evaluation system, there are many indicators, along with concrete data, that indicate strategy and program success. These include:

- dramatic increases in participation by at-risk youth;
- positive feedback from participants, parents, community leaders (including school board members), and agency representatives;
- dramatic increases in employment of minority and high-risk neighborhood residents;
- increased skills by program participants, e.g., aquatics, sports, social, artistic; and
- increases in number and frequency of other

agencies (e.g., governmental, social service) which seek collaborative arrangements with MSCR.

The program staff have cooperated with a University of Wisconsin-Madison research team in the development of several studies of the after-school program. One of the studies indicated that third graders in formal on-site after-school programs when compared to others not in such settings:

- earned better grades and conduct ratings;
- got along better with peers;
- spent more time on studies and enrichment activities;
- shared more activities with adults and peers; and
- spent less time watching television and playing outdoors with peers without supervision.

Other studies are planned for the future.