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## ***The Recreation Plus Program*** in Houston, Texas<sup>1</sup>

*Presenter:*

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### **Background**

With a population of 1,631,766, Houston is the largest city in Texas. Twenty-eight percent of the city is African American, 28% Hispanic, 25% Caucasian, and 19% other races. Youth crime is a major problem. Much to society's disappointment, many crimes are being committed by very young boys and girls, either as individuals or as members of a gang. The crimes range from skipping school to selling and buying drugs to murder. Youth in the community have been as concerned about these issues as have adult residents. For example, the Recreation Plus Program, Houston's current effort to provide a response to these conditions, started when Houston children told Mayor Bob Lanier in November 1993 that they wanted the Department of Parks and Recreation to do something about crimes that were being committed against youth by youth. The youth did not have the answers, but they said, "Mayor, it's your responsibility." As a result, the Recreation Plus Program was proposed to provide enhanced programming at 31 selected Community Centers throughout the city.

### **Program Description**

The goal of the Recreation Plus Program is to offer children free, supervised, entertaining, and educational activities in an effort to focus their time in a positive and productive manner. Although it is aimed primarily at youth 12-18 years of age, the program will also help youth 6-11 and young adults 19-26. The program provides for an average of 36

additional hours per week at each of the 31 recreation centers.

### **Objectives**

- (1) Provide a greater opportunity for teen interaction and enrichment, allowing for positive influence and support from role model members of the community in a recreation and leisure setting.
- (2) Address the idle time of youth at-risk.
- (3) Promote prevention and provide idle youth with needed alternatives to the negative impacts of crime, drug-use, and gang activity.
- (4) Involve all the potential stakeholders in each community in shaping the respective community's strategy. Key contributors such as schools, residents, law enforcement, religious institutions, businesses, community agencies, government, and residents' organizations are included in the planning.

### **Program Structure**

In December 1993 the program was launched at nine sites—one in each of the council districts. Advisory councils were established consisting of a cross-section of the community including citizens, educators, religious leaders, and youth, who came together to analyze each community's needs and to identify some immediate solutions that could be implemented. In January 1994, Recreation Plus was extended to another ten sites, and in February, the total was increased to 31. Security, program quality,

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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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equipment, and operating hours were common issues that needed to be addressed at each site.

Participants are given a laminated registration card, which is presented each time they enter the building. Attendance rosters are filed and monitored by site. A master report is formulated and presented each month to track performance.

Youth programs developed at each of these facilities are community-based in nature and include tutorials; self-esteem building; teen enrichment; cultural enrichment including drama, art and music experiences; and youth sports. The community-based programs were formulated with input from each neighborhood. By extending hours at the recreation centers, the parks and recreation department is able to provide enhanced programs for youth for various age groups to enjoy. The new hours also allow greater involvement by parents which encourages role modeling and support.

To initiate the program, 75 university students majoring in education and physical education were hired as program staff. A summit of youth service providers was held. As a result, over a thousand agencies have come forward to provide assistance. This has led to the creation of some 60 partnerships.

An additional 12,000 participants are being reached annually through the Recreation Plus Program. The involvement of citizens and partners such as the Police Activities League (PAL), the Boys Club, the YMCA and YWCA, Girl and Boy Scouts, churches, schools and corporate sponsors and two additional staff persons at each site have all enhanced the program. In addition, parents are recruited to chaperon, coach, speak to groups, and assist in other capacities.

### **Activity Areas**

The department provides:

- (a) Educational programs including speakers and visual aids that encourage youth to feel good about themselves and to build self-esteem.
- (b) Meaningful and rewarding activities through community service projects that enhance the lives of youth and citizens in the community.
- (c) After-school study time and one-on-one tutorial assistance to youth having problems with school work.
- (d) Programs, activities, and other events to keep at-risk youth involved after regular school hours and on weekends. Typically, these youth lack the talent to become members of a school sports program, and are not likely to volunteer for any activities. Equipment, supplies, and uniforms are given to each participant to help

develop a sense of belonging, order, and structure.

(e) Coaches who are either recreation personnel or volunteers have been certified by the National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA). Coaches are responsible for providing a roster and arranging practice schedules for each team; formulating rules for all participants to follow; and ensuring that all youth learn the fundamentals of each sport. Recreation staff are responsible for officiating games as needed.

(f) Contract security at each Recreation Plus Program facility. A uniformed security guard is on duty through the late evenings until closing time.