
A Collaborative Public/Private Street Outreach Partnership in Olympia, Washington¹

Presenter:

Steven Zoet,² Recreation Services Manager

Background

Olympia, Washington (population 36,740; 90% Caucasian) lies about midway between Portland and Seattle on the I-5 corridor which connects these two larger urban cities. Organized gangs within the Tacoma/Seattle region recognize Olympia as a fertile area for the recruitment of high-risk youth into gangs.

“Edge kids” are those in need of public or private assistance but who are not likely to access public services until they have encountered the juvenile court system. Many are homeless, coming from a dysfunctional or nonsupportive home environment. Most have little or no connection to the education system, their families, or society at large. Therefore, these youth are susceptible to the appeal of finding a sense of acceptance and a fulfillment of basic needs through the gang culture.

The city council, merchants, and residents watched as the number of edge kids rose with a resulting adverse impact on the urban core. The kids hung out in large numbers at The Olympia Center, which is the city’s downtown community center, and while the center has a youth lobby that houses some traditional recreation equipment, serving this population was not the purpose for which it was originally designed. These youth became the source of numerous complaints from facility patrons and merchants in the downtown area.

The staff of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services recognized the severity of the

problem. In 1991 Olympia contracted with Thurston County Community Youth Services to provide two social workers who possessed the skills and experience necessary to identify and reach out to troubled youth. Their challenge was to meet youth where many of them live-on the street.

Rather than expecting those engaged in an unhealthy or alternative lifestyle to participate in traditional recreation programs and services, the outreach counselors met with youth one-on-one in the downtown area. Their charge was to identify and develop relationships with these youth and ultimately to connect them with appropriate public healthcare, job opportunities, education, recreation, and other social services. The objective was to break the pattern of homeless youth and then to help them avoid difficult circumstances and reversion to a recurring, unhealthy lifestyle. Fundamental underlying assumptions for the street outreach program included:

- (1) providing proactive programs for troubled youth is more cost-effective than incarcerating them;
- (2) given the high rate of recidivism, youth who avoid the juvenile justice system have a better chance of living a more rewarding and productive life than youth who do not; and
- (3) street counseling is the most effective way to reach this high-risk population.

¹ 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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² Olympia Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services Department 222 N. Columbia Olympia, WA 98501
Phone: (360) 753-8380

Program

Goals and Objectives

Two primary goals, each with underlying objectives, provide the framework for this successful program.

Goal 1: To promote greater integration of training, communication and information regarding downtown youth between Community Youth Services; Olympia Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Services; and Olympia Police Departments.

Objectives

- (1) Implement a quarterly training program on how to deal effectively with downtown youth and their families, and how to provide referrals to needed services.
- (2) Develop biweekly meetings with the parks, recreation and cultural services and police department supervising personnel to communicate emerging issues and concerns of the downtown youth population.

Goal 2: Expand and enhance case management, outreach, and advocacy for youth in the downtown area.

Objectives

- (1) Expand hours and days of street intervention devoted to downtown youth.
- (2) Develop and run special services and programs for street youth at The Olympia Center or another appropriate location. Community Youth Services staff will recruit and train street youth in a peer-helper model. The model is intended to encourage teens to assist one another.
- (3) Recruit and train six volunteers to assist with street outreach.

Key Players

Community Youth Services, the police, and parks, recreation, and cultural services departments have a vested interest in the success of area youth. As a result, these agencies have developed a symbiotic relationship through which each relies on the assistance, cooperation, and support of the other. The collaborative effort has resulted in unifying the agencies in achieving a common goal of improved investment in area youth as an alternative to their entering the criminal justice system. Approximately

\$37,500 from the city's general fund is invested annually in this program.

Staffing

The street outreach program is sustained primarily through the efforts of two outreach workers employed and supervised by Community Youth Services with their salaries funded mostly by the city. They are an integral link with parks and police department staff. The outreach workers have established an informal, drop-in presence at The Olympia Center and have developed a sense of trust with the high-risk youth and center staff.

An additional objective of the outreach counselors is to develop programs and training for park and police department staff which address the changing issues and needs of troubled youth. By drawing on community resources, programs were instituted to help youth gain job skills, properly apply for and find employment, develop interviewing skills, learn skills needed for independent living, address safe sex, substance abuse, personal health, teen parenting, and other issues.

The outreach workers developed and facilitated special self-help groups at The Olympia Center and recruited and trained other youth to become volunteer peer helpers. Participating youth responded to the positive support by actively seeking counseling, medical assistance, and other services.

In addition to working the streets, the outreach workers frequent a teen center that operates Monday through Friday from 2:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. at The Olympia Center, as well as a Friday late-night program operating from 9 p.m. to midnight. Site capacity of approximately 150 is often met and staff hope to accommodate additional youth as more facilities become available to expand services.

Marketing

Informing youth of available services is not often done through any organized or traditional marketing effort. Street youth typically do not have access to the traditional forms of program or service information such as print, television, or radio. Postings in public places usually go unnoticed. Yet, many displaced youth have a highly developed network of communicating with each other on the street. As a result, most of those needing to connect with an outreach worker know how, when, and where to do so. Also, the outreach workers actively seek out youth on the streets, their environment, rather than expecting youth to come to them in an office environment or other more traditional areas of accessing social services.

Measurement of Program Outcome

According to tracking completed by Community Youth Services and the parks, recreation, and cultural services department, each month approximately 90 youth and young adults (1,080 annually) are directed into a social service program or to an agency that can begin to meet their needs. Approximately 15 homeless youth return home each month with the support of an outreach worker. Each month 8 to 10 youths are positively diverted from the juvenile justice system, i.e., a crime is prevented and the city saves the escalating costs of police and judicial actions including expensive incarceration.

Based on the annual operating costs of \$37,500 and the assumption of 1,080 clients served, the city is spending approximately \$34.72 per individual annually for diversion and services provided through Community Youth Services. With tight fiscal constraints and ever-escalating criminal justice costs, the city officials feel this is a good investment of public funds.