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## **City Streets/At-Risk Youth Division in Phoenix, Arizona<sup>1</sup>**

*Presenter:*  
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### **Background**

Phoenix is the eighth largest city in the United States with a population of 1.07 million (3 million in the metropolitan area). The city covers an area of 450 square miles which is geographically larger than Chicago or San Francisco. Sixty-eight percent of the residents are Caucasian, 21% Hispanic and 10% either Native American, African American or Asian.

In 1980, the Parks, Recreation and Library Department's South Phoenix Youth Center was opened next to a high school. The Center was built in response to requests from teenagers who said they needed a safe place to hang out. This Center offered a "one-stop-shop" for youth recreational and social services.

In 1985, residents from West Phoenix expressed concern over the lack of structured activities for teens and the emergence of juvenile delinquency activity in their area. The Department responded by drawing upon the philosophy, approaches, and programs that had been developed at the South Phoenix Youth Center, and expanded this type of service to become a mobile outreach service providing recreational, educational, social, and cultural programs for teens at outreach sites such as malls, schools, and park sites at which there was no regular programming. This program was named The City Streets Program.

By 1990 The City Streets concept had spread to all areas of the city. In 1991 the Department further confirmed its commitment to youth by identifying youth at-risk as a priority for the next decade. In response to this charge and input provided through a citywide youth conference, a Youth At-Risk Task

Force was convened to research and evaluate the Department's youth programs and services. The Task Force recommended that youth services be increased throughout Phoenix with special programming emphasis for at-risk youth.

In July 1993 the Department centralized many youth programming resources and created the City Streets/At-Risk Youth Division. The Division initially was designed to provide administrative and specialized support services for staff and to explore community resources to create partnerships for expanded programs and services. The Division is still currently providing this support, but has taken on many additional programs, coordinating and supervising direct services for youth. From its initial staff of five, the Division has grown to a full-time staff of 32.

The Division's goal statement reads:

The Department is committed to providing youth services in a safe and nondiscriminatory environment. Further, the Department strives to maintain open communication with youth and agencies and to provide linkages and needed referral information for services not provided by the Department.

For programming purposes, youth are divided into five age groups: 1-5, 6-12, 13-15, 16-18, and 19-21 years old. The Department seeks to identify the needs of each of these age groups and respond with appropriate programming.

At-risk youth come from all backgrounds, races, and areas of the city. They are youth who are, or

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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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have the potential to be, influenced negatively by familial, environmental, peer, and/or social factors that deter their positive mental and social development. These factors may include:

- substance abuse;
- lack of educational opportunities;
- child abuse;
- poor peer relationships;
- behavior/discipline problems;
- low self-esteem;
- lack of positive role models;
- dysfunctional home environment;
- lack of positive leisure activities;
- economic deprivation;
- unsafe school/neighborhood environment; and
- early sexual activity.

### **The Division's Philosophy**

Prevention is the building block for sponsoring quality youth recreational, cultural, and educational services. According to Jim Colley, Director of the Phoenix Parks, Recreation, and Library Department:

We in the Park and Recreation profession have always taken pride in the enrichment we bring to people's lives. The role of recreation is evolving, as is the environment of our youth, due to the social changes occurring in today's world.

The city of Phoenix realizes the importance of recreation and the many benefits it has to offer: leadership opportunities; ethnic and cultural harmony; environmental education; physical fitness; positive self-esteem and self-image; and, most important, the opportunity to reduce the antisocial, juvenile delinquent behavior prevalent among many youth (see Exhibit 6A, pages 72-73).

Jim Colley stated:

My staff say we are becoming counselors and social workers. That's fine, I believe we should be. My philosophy is that if a young man comes in on drugs or a young woman comes in who is pregnant, we have to help. Young ladies come to my female staff and say 'I'm pregnant, will you come home with me and help me talk to my mom.' They are scared, so of course we help. We often adopt these kids. We respond as best we can to whatever they need. I would not have a

problem with my Department being called a Department of Community Services.

Our job is to make young people whole in any way we can, and offering wholesome recreation activities is only one aspect of that. It's a way of reaching them. It gives us an opportunity to help them straighten out other parts of their lives that are not good. You have to do this work one case at a time. If you talk about doing it by the masses or in general terms, it will fail. Follow-through is critical and that is our limiting factor. We don't have the manpower or money to follow through at the level we should.

### **Resources**

To supplement the city's resources, the division has secured federal, state, and private foundation grants. To facilitate the grant writing process, a full-time grant researcher and coordinator were hired in spring 1994. In the first full year, the Division submitted 25 applications for funds, of which 15 were successful, yielding almost \$1 million in additional resources.

To support this grant application work, a resource library of data and statistical findings related to youth has been developed. Programs funded by outside sources request applicants to demonstrate identifiable causes, existence of need, and/or current trends relating to the proposal issue. Community assessments and community readiness plans are also being collected. This library ensures these data are readily available to be included in grant proposals.

The city's Golf Enterprise Fund also generates approximately \$150,000 per year for at-risk youth programs. In 1993, despite vigorous opposition from golfers, the Phoenix City Council agreed to take 25¢ for each round of golf played at the city's five golf courses and direct it to specific youth programs. Other recreation activities which generate revenue such as athletic leagues or adult classes could not as easily be used for this purpose. Approximately \$50,000 of the golf money is used for a junior golf program for at-risk youth, but the remainder is used elsewhere.

### **Programs**

#### **Juvenile Curfew Program**

In 1992 gang-related homicides and other gang-related crimes, including drive-by shootings,

**Exhibit 6A** “It’s Not Fun To Be a Good Kid”

Jack is 14 years old and has been in a gang since he was 11 years old. His dad died from an overdose of drugs, his mother is a waitress and works two jobs. His older sister is on drugs. Jack has snorted so much cocaine that the membrane in his nose is almost destroyed. Jim Colley, Department Director, describes his personal experiences with Jack:

My staff took Jack on a camping trip on the San Juan River with a mixed group, half of whom were young, hard-core gang members and the other half were disabled young people. At first Jack was standoffish. He was hard to get to know, but he gradually bonded with one of our staff members. He began to communicate. Sitting on the banks of the river, he said it was the first time he could remember sitting relaxed and comfortable without the fear of somebody shooting him.

When the group returned, the staff introduced me to Jack. We hired him part time in one of our centers. Last semester he got all A’s in high school. We have held his hand. One of my staff invites Jack along when she goes on a date with her boyfriend to a movie or to dinner. I take him out to dinner occasionally and bought him some clothes for Christmas.

I say to him, ‘If I had been subjected to what you have been subjected to, then I would belong to a gang if there was one in my town.’ I tell him, ‘You have got people committed to getting you out. Use your leadership skills and help others get out from the gangs.’ When you look at all the things that he has done, you can understand why he said, ‘It’s not fun to be a good kid.’ He has been on both sides of drive-by shootings; done all kinds of illegal things; so to keep him interested you’ve got to have some things that are high-risk and challenging.

We had a reunion of the 70 kids that we have taken on San Juan River trips over a weekend. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The way Jack and other gang members helped the disabled kids was amazing. They took a 14-year-old, who was in a wheelchair and could not walk, and put him on their backs and went hiking in the woods. I saw hard-core gang members help paraplegics go to the rest rooms, and say to my staff, ‘It feels so good to be helping someone.’

The problem is that when those kids go back into their home environment in Phoenix, they go back to the old lifestyle. We expose them to good things; they buy into it; then we put them back into their old bad scene. My concern all the time in these situations is how do we follow through. We aren’t doing that well enough, but I don’t know what we can do to improve, given the limited resources we have.

One day the staff member who has been closest to Jack came into my office crying. She said, ‘we may have lost Jack. He got into a big fight with his mother so Jack is on the streets right now. He hasn’t been in to pick up his pay checks. He called in.’ My staff member said “Jim will be disappointed,” and Jack said “I don’t want him to know.” I’m confident that unless the kid gets back to his gang or the police pick him up, he will be back to us.’

A few months later Jack returned from the streets. He has since reapplied to participate in the tattoo removal program; he is back working with the internship program and is attending summer school. Jack knows that he messed up and wants to make up for it. He also has noticed how some staff do not provide him the support he received before he left, and feels that those that do not support him are not ‘legit.’ Jack will continue to need staff and family support in making life decisions and setting goals. Staff will continue to support Jack as long as necessary. Staff also discuss consequences for actions, goal setting, following through with commitments, and decision-making skills with Jack. He has not yet discussed where he was during his hiatus from the program; staff feel that discussion will be forthcoming when he feels he can trust us again.

increased six-fold over 1990. In response to the increasing number of youth affected by violent crime, Phoenix started enforcement of the Juvenile Curfew Ordinance, the Juvenile Gun Law Ordinance, and the Juvenile Liquor Law Ordinance, which were previously passed but not widely enforced. Initially, the Juvenile Curfew Program was enforced in one section of the city on a trial basis for under-16 youth and youth 16-18 who were on the streets between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. and, midnight and 5 a.m. respectively. Groups in that section who thought they were being singled out by the police department opposed this enforcement. However, the curfew was so successful that council members from other parts of the city wanted it implemented in their area, and the opposition disappeared. Public meetings were held across the city and there was overwhelming support for the curfew.

The Juvenile Curfew program is jointly operated by the Police and Parks, Recreation and Library Departments. Four recreation centers are open all night as screening stations, one in each quadrant of the city. Each is staffed by two police officers and two recreation leaders. Youth caught violating the curfew are transported by police officers to one of the recreation centers. Parents and/or guardians are notified and youth undergo a 35-minute processing by police which includes checking for a criminal history and detecting signs of substance abuse or health problems. Youth are issued a citation, photographed and then turned over to the recreation leaders while awaiting their parents. If no parent or guardian can be contacted or if the parent or guardian fails to pick up the juveniles, they may be placed with Child Protective Services or taken to the local Juvenile Court Center.

The police and recreation staff work well together. Recreation staff are particularly helpful in facilitating and communicating with youth who often distrust or dislike the police. Unfortunately, the Juvenile Courts caseload dramatically increased by about 5,000 per year. To alleviate the overload, the city introduced a diversion program through which a citation can be dismissed if violators and their parents attend and complete a parenting education class. If they complete the class, the citation is dropped. Youth who do not go through the diversion program and cannot pay the citation are referred to the Park, Recreation and Library Department to perform community service at selected park sites, libraries, mountain parks, and community centers. Over 1,500 such youth were referred to the Department in the first six months of the program.

A counseling component addresses common issues including substance abuse, lack of job

opportunities, lack of job skills, teen pregnancy, teen parenting, school dropouts, prostitution, lack of parental support, homeless youth, and nonpositive recreation activities.

The Division recognized that picking up the curfew violators, charging them, and sending them home again was not efficient since all their other problems remained. The Juvenile Courts had a counseling system, but it was so overwhelmed that it was 30 days or more before a follow-up phone call was made. Thus, the recreation staff in the four centers took over this task. They became the follow-up agency responsible for getting the youth back into school, seeing a drug counselor, entering a GED program or arranging whatever other services were needed. The goal is to give the youth some hope and point them in a direction which may enable them to address their problems. Unfortunately, with approximately 100 youth passing through the Juvenile Curfew Program per week, follow-up cannot be inclusive enough to follow up on all cases on a long-term basis.

In the first 11 months of the curfew program, police statistics revealed a 10.4% reduction in juvenile arrests for violent crimes such as homicide, sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault. During that same period adult crimes, citywide, increased 6.7% while overall juvenile crime increased only one-half of one percent.

### **Tattoo Removal Program**

The Division has been successful in persuading some youth to leave gangs, but the existence of tattoos on their arms, hands, neck, or face makes progress difficult. These insignia make it hard to find employment, to avoid fights in school, and to convince people that they have left a gang.

Doctors typically charge between \$500 and \$1,000 for the laser removal process which leaves no scarring of the skin tissue. The laser equipment costs almost \$100,000 and removal requires between two and six treatments depending on the size of the tattoo and ink color.

The X-Tattoo program grew out of a discussion between a Phoenix businessman and a former gang member who were on a rafting excursion together. He learned of programs in San Jose, Dallas, and Chicago which removed tattoos from youth in exchange for community service. He then raised \$8,000 to start the program in an office in a recreation center. As of February 1995 there were 75 youth enrolled in the program with 60 on a waiting list.

### **Collaboration with the Police Activities League**

For many years the Police Department operated Police Activities League (PAL) Centers, but never collaborated with Park and Recreation, and vice versa. PAL has recreation centers that would close when, for example, officers and youth participants would go off-site on field trips to sporting contests. In addition, the number of youth who could participate in off-site trips was limited by a lack of transportation.

In July of 1994, with Arizona Supreme Court Crime Reduction Funds, the Park, Recreation and Library Department offered to assist within the PAL Centers, thus providing staff to offer structured, supervised programs on a regular basis. This began a collaboration which provided three part-time recreation leaders, working for 25 hours per week in PAL Centers in Central and South Phoenix.

### **Mobile Unit Partnership Program**

The City Streets Mobile Unit Partnership was developed in 1992 in collaboration with the Arizona Cactus Pine Girl Scouts Association which was seeking to provide direct outreach services.

A renovated bookmobile brings employment, recreation, education, and social services to otherwise underserved communities. Activities and services reflect the needs and demands of site participants, and are adapted from existing Department and Girl Scout programs. Inside the mobile unit are computers, Ping-Pong tables, foosball tables, library books, and other recreation resources. It visits five school sites during their lunch period and, in the evenings, five unstaffed park sites that have reported problems. In one week the mobile unit serves approximately 1,000 youth citywide.

### **Youth Sports Program-Public Housing**

Through a 1994 \$125,000 Youth Sports Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), recreation services were expanded in five public housing sites. The Youth Sports Program seeks to reduce drugs, gangs, and violence by educating and empowering youth through recreational, social, and educational programs. The Park, Recreation and Libraries Department, working with the city Housing Department offers intramural sports leagues, youth development workshops, sports development clinics, youth employment opportunities, cultural awareness activities, and citywide district sports. A teen council assists in programming and outreach. The intent is to encourage positive, drug-free, lifestyle choices that

will have a long-term positive impact.

### **Recreation Internship Program**

The people needed to lead at-risk youth programs have to be individuals with whom youth can identify. Often this requires training people on the job. University programs do not have curricula which are geared to developing at-risk youth program leaders. This means reverting back to the old apprenticeship system of recruiting people (often former gang members or former athletes) and setting up a program to train them.

The recreation internship program assigns youth, ages 14-19, to a mentor who will work with them as they progress through a series of experiences. Workshops are offered where they learn skills like CPR and first aid, how to fill out a job application, and how to interview for a job. Recreation programming and leadership skills such as how to run special events, sports leagues and typical recreation operations are also taught.

### **Teen Councils and Forums**

Teen councils foster youth empowerment, ownership and responsibility for their recreational and social activities. Their popularity has grown tremendously in the Department. From the original teen council established in 1980 at the South Phoenix Youth Center there are now over 25 councils throughout the City.

Youth representatives from recreation centers, schools, or park sites meet weekly or bimonthly to plan activities, trips, special events, educational development, and agendas with trained professional recreation staff. Teen council members elect their officers and representatives.

Local teen councils have led to the development of a citywide Youth Advisory Board. Through a partnership with the local United Way and Nestle's Corporation, a Teen Council Outreach Program has been formulated.

Three programs which have developed because of input from the Teen Councils are Wuzz-Up Teens, Youth Forums, and an annual Teen Conference. Wuzz-Up Teens is the name chosen by youth for a quarterly newsletter and a cable television program used by the department to communicate with teens.

The Division, in collaboration with the Human Services Department, the Neighborhood Services Department, Equal Opportunity Department and the Police Department, planned, developed, implemented, evaluated, and reported on a series of youth forums held in each city council district. Youth were provided with the opportunity to present

issues, concerns, programs, and services to each city council member. The forums were held in community centers, libraries and schools.

The annual Teen Conference consists of a day-long program of workshops. It brings together teen councils from across the city, gives them leadership experience, and usually attracts around 200 youth participants.