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## **Youth Summits: Exploring Collaboration to Maximize Opportunities for At-Risk Youth in Portland, Oregon<sup>1</sup>**

*Presenter:*

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While retaining our uniqueness and autonomy, we in the field of recreation, who share the same values and goals, can accomplish more by working together than we can on our own. This is the chance for us to demonstrate the full value of who we are and what we can do. Our youth are at-risk, and our society is at a loss. Up to this point, we've been fighting a nuclear war with conventional weapons. The first addition to our arsenal must be a new way of thinking...we must learn to work together. Because society needs help with its youth. And we have a piece of the solution. (Charles Jordan, Director, Portland Parks and Recreation)

### **Background**

In 1992 the Portland Parks and Recreation Department began using youth summits to bring together youth-serving agencies in order to shape an agenda to serve the needs of at-risk youth. In this era of diminishing resources, collaboration between recreation providers and others in the community is essential if the role of recreation is to be maximized to its full potential. Since the first summit, other summits have been held focusing on the needs of particular areas of Portland. This has helped focus attention on services at the neighborhood level.

In his keynote address to the first summit, Portland Parks and Recreation Director Charles Jordan told representatives of Portland's youth-serving organizations, that funding providers increasingly insist upon collaboration between service providers before they will consider the worthiness of any recreation program. "Therefore," Jordan concluded, "it is imperative for us to be

proactive and proceed toward real collaboration, i.e., working towards shared decision making, shared resources, and a shared mission."

In support of Jordan's statement, Willie Stoudamire, a director of the Mallory Christian Church's "People Are Beautiful" program, noted that collaboration gives their program more legitimacy in the community. "Traditional funders tend to just gloss over us," said Stoudamire. "But if we're in a group effort, they pay attention."

From the funder's perspective, Don Ballenger, a Senior Vice President with United Way, explained why his agency was trying to encourage collaborative efforts:

The single youth care provider can't effectively serve its clients anymore. The problems are just too overwhelming. So if agencies can demonstrate that they are working together, they get a much more favorable review.

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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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## Focus on Prevention

Jordan also recognized the need to reposition the role of recreation in the community. While maintaining its function of providing “fun and games,” recreation must also portray itself as a powerful tool in providing at-risk youth with positive alternatives in their lives. This is the key to winning support for recreation in a society that remains unconvinced about the merits of preventative programs. According to Jordan:

The mission of the recreation field is to demonstrate that we are more than just fun and games. Allowing ourselves to be relegated to just fun and games has weakened our competitive position at budget time. We are big brothers and big sisters. We are the nurses, the chauffeurs. We feed them. We pick them up. We patch them up. We are their role models; we are their friends. We play multiple roles in parks and recreation, and that is why the responsibility is so awesome. But it is also a tremendous opportunity, and we recognize that.

So far, the funding scale is heavily weighted towards dealing with the symptoms rather than the causes. Los Angeles currently spends \$25 million a year on school security. Detroit spends \$4 million, and New York spends \$75 million a year. That’s enough money to hire 2,000 more teachers or to buy books for 537,000 students. “Now you tell *me* where the emphasis lies,” says Jordan.

### ***Exhibit 8A***

There was a certain river and many human beings were in it struggling to get to shore. Some succeeded; some were pulled ashore by kindhearted people on the banks. But many were carried down the stream and drowned. It is no doubt a wise thing; it is nobler that under those conditions charitable people devote themselves to helping the victims out of the water. But... it would be better if some of those kindly people on the shore engaged in rescue work, would go up the stream and find out who was pushing the people into it.

Tom Johnson  
Mayor (1901-1909)  
Cleveland, Ohio

Society may want to get tough on crime, but society does not seem prepared to say that prevention is more effective than rehabilitation. Prevention and rehabilitation—we need them both. However, I contend that the only permanent, affordable, and sustainable solution is to be found in prevention.

Each young person has to travel down a road of choices. One road leads to higher self-esteem and leadership, values, and support; the other to violence, destruction, hate, and fear. Each of those roads brings the young person in contact with the larger community, one in a positive manner, one in a negative manner. Even those who end up in the juvenile justice or criminal justice system eventually end up at the beginning of the road of choices again. Along with education, employment, family, and other supportive, positive influences in a person’s life, recreation has a role to play in helping lead young people down the positive path of choices.

## Summit Procedures

### Long-Range Goals Identified

During a typical summit, attendees break into small groups to explore the concept of collaboration. Each group is asked to establish its common ground, what can be accomplished by working together, how to make collaboration work, and what the next step should be in making this concept a reality. At the first summit in 1992 the groups identified three primary long-term goals:

- (1) to ensure that every youth who wants it has access to affordable recreation opportunities regardless of his or her finances, cultural background, or ability;

### ***Exhibit 8B***

The [Summit] meeting broadened my appreciation for the vitally important role that recreation can play in the lives of families and our communities. In that light, Portland Parks and Recreation stands as a key building block to providing and facilitating current and future opportunities.

Stanley D. Peterson, Director  
Youth Gangs Program

- (2) to reinforce the role of recreation in improving public safety through prevention; and
- (3) to have a stronger, united voice in maximizing limited resources.

Recognizing that collaboration needs both form and direction, the recreation providers also identified critical tasks needed to ensure success. These included:

- (a) focusing on increased networking and public relations; and
- (b) developing a mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of their programs.

### Networking

The goal of networking is to work more closely together to provide a safety net to ensure that every child is served by someone, whether this be the park and recreation department, the Boy Scouts, or whoever. Knowing which providers offer what programs and activities and to identify roadblocks that prevent them from offering more is essential for success. At the summit, delegates laid the groundwork for creating a *resource needs and resources-to-share data base* among organizations with information on facilities, funding, transportation, participants, volunteers/mentors, and training.

This system has led to increased opportunities for children in their community. For example, one program group wanted to develop a computer learning program for youth in a specific area of the city. Luckily, within a one block radius, a program that had 15 computers was already available. Networking enabled these two providers to come together to better serve the youth in that community. In another instance, one group might have a gymnasium, while another group has an arts-and-

crafts room. The group with the gymnasium wants to add an arts-and-crafts program. Rather than build new facilities, access to existing facilities is provided.

### Public Relations

Another issue of importance to summit participants was how to improve communication with the public. In identifying the best methods to reach every child and family with information on available recreational opportunities, the group discussed two strategies:

- (1) the development of a *multiprovider activity guide* or brochure which provides information on activities, as well as the appropriate provider to contact; and
- (2) the organization of an annual *Recreation Fair* for children and their families with representatives from all recreation providers on hand to talk about their programs.

### Evaluating Effectiveness

Finally, summit participants recognized that in order for their efforts to be taken seriously, procedures had to be developed for evaluating the effectiveness of their programs. To meet their short-term goals, recreation providers require information on who is being served, what their needs are, and whether those needs are being met. This information also forms the basis for a long-term evaluation of what role recreation plays in providing positive differences in the lives of participating young people. Evaluation provides the statistical evidence necessary to compete effectively for the ever-shrinking pool of funding resources.

However, setting up a system for documenting the impact of such a broad array of services throughout a large city is likely to be extremely costly and time-consuming. Therefore, summit participants decided to focus their study on the North, Northeast and Southeast sections of the city. This would enable them to tap into an already-existing data gathering system set up by "The Leaders' Roundtable," a team of civic, private and business leaders committed to the goal of 100% high school graduation in the adopted area by the year 1996. By adding their own questions to the Leaders' Roundtable questionnaire, summit participants were able to gather the information they needed to document their own endeavors.

#### ***Exhibit 8C***

Sometimes we need a reality check. I work with teen mothers. And sometimes I forget to think if what I'm doing is really helping them. I need to walk in the shoes of these moms. I need to let them speak for me.

Cheryl Chatman  
Portland Public Schools  
Monroe Program

***Exhibit 8D***

Transportation is our highest priority. Some of these kids never get away from where they're living. Taking them to the waterfront is like taking them to Heaven... and it's less than two miles away. But we just don't have the transportation to do it very often.

Dr. Dapo Sobomehir  
Operation E.A.S.Y.

There is no limit to what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.

Through a collaboration between Campfire Boys and Girls and Portland Parks and Recreation, we were able to take 13 teen mothers on a two-night camping trip. What happened up there was more wonderful than I can explain. They bonded with each other. They learned they could rely upon themselves. Only two of the girls had ever been camping before.

Anna Street, Director  
PIVOT

**Collaborating to Deal with Immediate Needs**

Summit participants also focused on partnerships to maximize resources. They agreed that regular meetings should be established to build trust and teamwork principles, and that a good starting point for these meetings would be tackling the most immediate challenges: funding, transportation, and volunteers.

In response to such immediate needs, Portland Parks and Recreation Director Jordan committed to organizing a second meeting for recreation providers within six weeks, with transportation being the first issue covered. Two suggestions were to be discussed at that meeting:

- (a) using the limited financial resources of the Portland Parks and Recreation Youth Trust Fund to leverage additional support for buses and vans; and
- (b) establishing communication with foundation representatives and mass transit agencies (both of whom would be invited to attend).

Many members of the group had a successful collaborative experience as a result of the Summer Partnership Program. An official from the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry explained how collaboration with Portland Parks and Recreation gave his fundraising efforts added impetus:

As a result of the meeting, a seed was planted on how to get more for our money. Using \$1,000 provided by Portland Parks and Recreation as leverage, I was able to go to five other organizations and ask them for matching funds, ultimately turning

the original \$1,000 into \$5,000. It really gave us legitimacy to be able to say we were working with Portland Parks and Recreation on this.

Clearly, recreation providers working together can accomplish more than any single agency ever could. But to engage their fullest potential also requires collaboration with others in the community (see Exhibit 8E).

The Youth Summits have begun an important dialogue about ways local government and human service agencies can work together to better serve at-risk youth. I applaud this important first step. It will make a real difference in the lives of our children. Because when government and the community can combine their resources, we become a powerful force for social change. (Earl Blumenauer, Portland City Council Member)

**Identifying Other Resources for Collaboration**

To really make a difference in the lives of young people will mean reaching beyond recreation providers and working with others in the community to maximize resources. These "others" include businesses, foundations, corporations, schools, government agencies, and individuals. This not only maximizes program opportunities and enables more children to be reached, but it also enables the needs of the whole child to be better served.

When the corporate community saw that service providers were working collectively together, they were more willing to invest dollars because they knew those dollars would be well-spent. Thus, Nike

Corporation provided funding for an education program, basketball court, and play area at a program that serves young people who are kicked out of school. Instead of staying home, it is mandatory that the youth participate in the program. The program helps them keep up with their studies and avoid the negative impact of being at home with nothing to do.

In another case, AT&T Wireless Services has provided 14 free cellular telephones to members of neighborhood response teams to speed up the response time for dealing with crisis situations involving area youth. In addition, over the past two years, AT&T Wireless Services has completely refurbished the Black Education Center's interior and exterior, and has renovated and landscaped the Columbia Children's Aboretum.

Collaboration is not the answer for every situation. An organization by itself can often plan and implement an activity more expediently than a group of organizations can. However, in many contexts individual organizations acting alone may lack the resources and the clout to produce the desired results.

Collaborations are more effective at developing an understanding of the communitywide implications of problems and solutions. They are more able to mobilize large segments of the community to effect change. A group effort can bring together diverse opinions and develop a program, an activity, or a campaign that will be supported by many organizations.

### **Funding for Collaborative Efforts**

One of the means of providing the city's share of funding for some of the collaborative efforts that have emerged from the Summits is the Portland Parks and Youth Trust Fund. The Fund derives its money from a 50¢ fee for each round of golf played at one of the four city-owned golf courses. This raises between a quarter of a million and \$300,000 a year, which is earmarked specifically for youth at-risk programs throughout the city of Portland. An additional fee of \$1 per round of golf for nonresidents also raises close to \$375,000 to help fund after-school programs. This money is leveraged by partners' contributions to the many collaborative projects in which the Parks and Recreation Department is involved.

### **Ongoing Efforts**

The process of meeting with agencies and having summits is ongoing. The Coordinator of Youth Services meets with service providers in the various sections of the community several times a year, and with particular service providers as often as once a month. The Youth Trust Fund acts a catalyst for insuring community involvement and collaboration. Access to funding is only available to programs that involve more than one agency. This principle also applies to Parks and Recreation Department programs.

### ***Exhibit 8E***

Ways that collaborations help communities identify gaps in current services and cooperate to fill the gaps:

- expand available services by cooperative programming and joint fundraising and grant programs;
- provide better services to clients through interagency communication about client needs, referral programs, and client case management;
- develop a greater understanding of client and community needs by seeing the whole picture;
- share similar concerns while being enriched by diverse perspectives that different members from varied backgrounds bring to the collaboration;
- reduce interagency conflicts and tensions by squarely addressing issues of competition and "turf;"
- improve communication with organizations within the community and, through those organizations, to larger segments of the community;
- mobilize action to affect needed changes through collective advocacy;
- achieve greater visibility with decision makers, the media, and the community;
- enhance staff skill levels by sharing information and organizing joint training programs;
- conserve resources by avoiding unnecessary duplication of services; and
- decrease costs through collective buying programs and other collective cost containment opportunities.