

YOUTH POWER!



Youth Involvement in Rural Communities

Promoting and implementing Systems of Care values and practices in a rural county offers a special challenge. Resources may be limited, travel may present issues, and the culture of rural communities may significantly differ from suburban or urban areas. This tip sheet offers some ideas on how to approach youth, families, and providers in rural areas when working with the New York State Systems of Care approach. Remember that all communities are important, no matter the population!



WHAT IS YOUTH INVOLVEMENT?

Youth involvement may be more than what you think it is! Truly effective youth involvement involves a partnership between youth and adults, not just the presence of young people on councils or in groups. While groups and circumstances vary, there are certain youth involvement goals you should strive for:

- ✓ **Youth-driven; youth-guided:** This is where youth are largely in charge of a group, including organization, planning, and decision-making.
- ✓ **Youth-informed; youth-consulted/shared decisions:** This is a step below youth-driven, but can be an important goal to reach. This is where youth are actively involved in the running of a group, and their input is taken seriously.

But you should move away from:

- ✓ **Manipulation; Decoration; Tokenism:** Youth may be on committees here, but their input is hardly ever given or used, or they are merely there to fill a quota. Sometimes, youth here may even be forced to vote or opine a certain way by adults.

WHERE TO START?

The very first step to increasing youth involvement and establishing a foothold in your rural communities is to do some research and look at your area's demographics (1). What do families look like in this area? What percentage of the population do people under 21 take up? This can give you some hints as to what the community's culture is like. The more youth there are in a rural area, the more likely the whole community will be receptive to heightened youth involvement and implementing SOC values. Note emigration/immigration dynamics of these areas, as well as economic trends...

- ❖ *Are a lot of youth leaving the area or coming in? (5)*
- ❖ *Is the area gaining or losing jobs?*
- ❖ *Is there a lot of development going on, or is the economy mainly farms and local businesses?*
- ❖ *Does the area have any natural attractions or other elements that draw tourism?*

This will clue you in to how the area approaches progress and change. If a lot of youth are leaving town, then you know it will be more of a challenge introducing SOC values to the community! Also, knowing about the local economy of your area will clue you in to how progressive the area is, how resourceful they are, and how you should approach them with a new concept like youth involvement!



TIPS FOR YOUTH INVOLVEMENT:

- ✓ Youth in rural counties may be discouraged by large distances and jumbled communication. **Use social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr to keep youth connected with each other.** (4)
- ✓ Offer incentives...but not money or gift cards. **Talk about how participation will be good resume builders and help improve professionalism.** (5)
- ✓ Use community spaces youth may be familiar with, such as schools youth involvement recruitment.
- ✓ Hold fun, accessible events to kick off youth involvement projects.
- ✓ Rural youth may be very skeptical. **Emphasize how important they are to SOC, and that they are stakeholders as much as families and adults.** Let them have some autonomy and implement their ideas. (3)
- ✓ Tie in SOC-promoting activities to other outlets that youth are involved in, like schools. **The more you can tie-in SOC to their communities, the easier it will be for them to understand SOC.**(4)
- ✓ If youth are living in or near poverty, recognize this and offer accessible resources they can afford and use regularly. **If travelling is a difficulty, suggest meeting via Skype, GooleChat, or another video chatting site.** (2)

CULTURAL COMPETENCY TIPS:

- ✓ Remember that each community has its' own culture. **Let youth tell you about themselves in their own way.** (2)
- ✓ Don't underestimate the size of rural communities. Even sparsely-populated areas might have a tight community. **Aurora, NY has a population of under 500, but they have the country's smallest recognized opera house and a very close arts community.**
- ✓ Don't just promote tolerance! Promote education and acceptance of diversity. **Some small towns are naturally less diversely populated, so education is especially important to promote understanding and acceptance!**(3)
- ✓ Be as accessible as possible financially. If you don't have a lot of money to work with, skillfully budget what you do have. **Allow youth to help you set budgets and look for ways to stretch out money.**

Want More Information Or Technical Assistance?

You're in luck! YOUTH POWER! is here to help! We are actively involved in increasing youth involvement within the NYS Success project, and we are here to offer tips, ideas, and youth and young adult perspective!

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