

## **Developing Our Future: Austin's Neighborhood Teen Program**

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“At the Center, the leaders care about me... they give me someone to talk to... they are always there for me. When they talk to us, we know what they're talking about and we say stuff to them we don't talk about without parents. The leaders are cool, real life.” – Teen Participant

“I learned to help out in my community... we go to different hospitals and stuff like that and we get experience that we wouldn't get otherwise... it's fun to help others.” – Teen Participant

“This program is showing them the different options and then they have to make the choices. We are trying to teach them that there are always options.” - Staff Member

“K\_ (17 year old female) has been involved with the program for three years. Since she's been in the program, her grades have gone up and down. Through the program, she's more independent now, and she will speak her mind more often. Sometimes we have to tell her to hush up because she's speakin' her mind a little bit too much.” – Staff Member

“The leaders check on us at school. They talk to our parents, they watch out for us. Some days I think I'd better do my homework or Ms. A\_ will be upset. They tell us all the time that they are our friends, but not our buddies. I've got other kids to come to program because the leaders are so nice.” – Teen Participant

“The kids have also made rules like if you don't do community service, you can't go on the trips. They all understand what they need to do. And I try to give them a lot of responsibility because this isn't the only thing we do, and even though we do meet on Tuesday and Thursday, we all are pretty busy. Thus, we all need to help out. So I try to get everyone to help with something, like plan a trip or a speaker.” – Staff Member

“I really enjoyed going to X University. The bus ride there and back gave me more time to be involved with kids from different centers. It was good to know where they live and what they do... I hope to see these kids some more back in Austin.” – Teen Participant

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Austin's Neighborhood Teen Program (NTP) is making a positive difference in the lives of teens. Recognizing that a "recreation" department must get beyond simply the provision of activities that keep kids safe and off the streets, NTP is a teen club program designed to help youth develop life skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will enable them to grow into productive adults. Thus, while the program is "fun" and uses recreational experiences to provide an initial attraction for participation, the overall goal of the program is "to aid and enhance the quality of



life for youth in Austin by providing relevant, diversified, educational, and recreational programs and services within a safe and positive learning environment." The majority of the program is devoted to such areas as helping teens stay in school, maintaining passing grades, and increasing the desire to pursue an education beyond high school; making positive choices about issues such as drug and alcohol usage, gangs, and sex; developing job readiness; and increasing cultural diversity awareness. Figure One on page 64 contains a complete list of program goals and means the programs uses to achieve these goals.

The goals of the program are consistent with major principles of youth development articulated in many youth work organizations and advocacy groups. For example, one program called America's Promise, started by Secretary of State Colin Powell during his retirement from the military, is mobilizing people from every sector of American life to build the character and competence of youth. To accomplish this goal, five "promises" have been articulated. These include creating and enabling ongoing relationships with caring adults; creating safe places with structured activities during nonschool hours; working to ensure that kids have a healthy start and future; helping youth develop marketable skills through effective education; and enabling youth to give back to their communities through community service. The goals of the NTP program are clearly consistent with the underlying principles of America's Promise.

NTP programs have been organized at 12 Austin Parks and Recreation Department (APARD) recreation centers. While each of the 12 sites have somewhat similar goals and objectives and use many of the same means for achieving results, the sites have flexibility and local autonomy in developing the best possible program to meet the needs of the specific group of teens they serve. However, program organizers have developed a list of components that each site is expected to build into their overall club program, including: three community service projects, three university visits, three guest speakers, two cultural events, three career field trips, and a job readiness program. In addition, it is expected that each site will hold regular meetings at least once per week from September through May. Most of the program sites go well beyond these expectations. Given this structure, the program has clearly moved beyond "fun and games."

At all sites, teens are given much responsibility for planning and developing activities related to the program components. Each club develops its own identification, including its own name. For example, one club calls itself "TEEN" (Teens Encouraging Excellence in Neighborhoods), another "PEERS" (Positive Experiences through Education, Responsibility and Service), and a third "Youth with Goals." Each site also elects its own officers and develops its own point system. Points are awarded for such things as getting good grades, staying in school, attending program meetings and activities, undertaking community service, and attending a church. In some cases, points are given for participation in other PARD programs. Demerits are also given for being late or absent from activities and exhibiting inappropriate behavior (e.g., profanity, negativity).

One of the teen leaders sums up some of the goals and working principles of the program this way:



*One of the things we really work hard on with our youth is not to give them everything.... if you keep giving the youth everything and you keep giving and giving and giving eventually it becomes not a privilege, but an expectation of the group. So for a lot of the things that we do they have to do community service; they clean the park, they help with the after school program, they set up the tutoring. They work. We just don't hand it to them and say "here it is. " The teens, at least the ones I've come in contact with, really give back to the community and they are trying hard to become productive people... it is not just let's give, let's give. But let's give and take, and let's see where we can go together, and let's see how we can better each other and better the community.*

### **Program Participation**

For 1999-00, there were 400 teens registered for the program. Each of the sites has a core group of participants, thus while a center might have 40 teens registered for the program, 12-20 teens might attend on a regular basis. Participants are recruited for the program by word of mouth, referrals from local schools, invitations to join, and current members encouraging their friends to become involved. APARD's Roving Leader program, an outreach effort to nurture relationships with uninvolved teens, also identifies potential participants in the community and works to get some of these individuals involved in the NTP program.

While the program is targeted for teens between 13 and 19, some of the programs included a few participants in the 9-12 age range. The breakdown of participants by age for 1999-00 was: 9-12 = 24.7%, 13-16 = 63.5%, and 17+ = 11.8%. Approximately 53% the participants were males and 44.3% were Hispanic, 40.8% African-American, 8.5% Anglo, and 6.5% listed as other (mainly Asian American).

### **Program Outcomes**

The program has been evaluated annually since 1997-98. Over the years, teens appear to have been highly satisfied with the program. In 1999-00, 85.5% of the participants indicated that they would sign up again for the program and 95.2% indicated that they would recommend the program to other teens.

Teens evaluated the quality of the program by rating certain program elements such as the facilities, registration process, timeliness of the beginning the program, staff competence, and quality of interactions with staff. All ratings were high. The high ratings for staff quality are particularly significant given the goals of the program, which include opportunities for mentoring as well as teaching a variety of skills. Beyond the data, interview comments received from participants and parents illustrated the types of relationships that were established and the importance of these relationships to all of the parties involved in the program.

### **Program Effectiveness**

Teens have also been asked to rate program impact. In general, teens reported positive changes in areas such as helping them to avoid problem behaviors such as juvenile delinquency, dropping out of school, and becoming involved with drugs. Ratings of impact were generally high, with items related to increasing



understanding of the importance of staying out of trouble and increasing respect for adults receiving the highest ratings.

Teens also gave high ratings to the program for increasing their understanding of the importance of staying in school, doing things for other people in the community, not using drugs, and not getting pregnant or not getting someone else pregnant. Finally, teens indicated that the program had increased their ability to apply for a job and their knowledge of possible colleges to attend.

Teen Coordinators reinforced these ratings by teens in their responses to questions concerning program outcomes. The coordinators indicated that the vast majority of teens were still in school, making progress in school, and improving their grades.

Given that the centers are located in inner city areas with high numbers of teens using drugs, not doing well at school, and getting in trouble in other ways, these findings are indeed impressive.

Of course the program is not perfect and there are ongoing efforts to improve it. For example, at some centers recruiting older teens has been difficult. Developing feeder programs for younger children ages 10-12 may make it easier to recruit them as teens. The Program Coordinator, Mini Freeman, is also working to provide additional training for the teen coordinators at each center, improve sharing of ideas between program sites, and increase the adherence of individual sites to the minimum program expectations. Efforts are being made to provide training in areas such as anger management, working with troubled teens, dealing with diversity, racial issues, and gangs.

Efforts are also being made to deal with staff turnover among the teen leaders. The relationships developed between staff and teens are the heart of the program. Most of the teen leaders are part time workers without benefits. For many of them, while devoted to working with teens, the work may be seasonal and something they undertake until they can achieve full time employment. The teens have been vocal about losing contact with leaders to whom they have grown attached. For individuals who have been let down over and over again by adults in their family or community, developing and losing relationships with adults who provide leadership for the NTP program is difficult. This is a significant problem across all youth serving organizations. The solution to this problem is in part higher pay and changing positions from part to full-time, and including benefits in the employment package.

The program is also moving toward extending into the summer months. The needs of youth participation in the program do not cease with the end of the school year. Making the program year- round will preserve the continuity of the program and build even stronger relationships between teens and leaders.



**FIGURE 1. NEIGHBORHOOD TEEN PROGRAM,  
AUSTIN PARKS AND RECREATION: DEPARTMENT  
PROGRAM OBJECTIVES AND MEANS PROGRAMS**

**Objective**

To motivate youth to stay in school and maintain passing grades

**Means for Achieving Objective**

- a) provide tutoring
- b) show interest and discuss advantages of youth staying in school
- c) provide points for getting good grades and being in school

To provide a setting where youth can feel a sense of belonging and be off the streets and in a positive, supportive environment.

- a) create a positive, supportive club environment
- b) provide mentoring and interaction with other teens
- c) provide opportunities for teens to be responsible and make positive choices through leadership in the teen club

To increase participants' ability to make positive choices about issues such as drug and alcohol usage, gangs, pregnancy, and sex education.

- a) utilize services of outside organizations to provide information about drug and alcohol abuse and safe sex/abstinence practices
- b) provide opportunities to feel a sense of belonging without having to join a gang

To contribute to participants' personal growth and job readiness.

- a) teach job related skills
- b) provide opportunities to teens to hold jobs and learn appropriate job-related skills

To teach youth positive means for resolving conflict.

- a) provide opportunities to discuss and find positive alternatives for resolving conflict situations

To increase trust and respect for other teens, adult mentors, and other authority figures.

- a) provide opportunities for youth to interact with positive adult role models (e.g., center staff and other adult community leaders)
- b) provide opportunities for youth to interact with fellow teens in an environment that encourages respect and trust



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To provide opportunities for new experiences in order to increase participants' recreation and job choice repertoires.

- a) provide opportunities for youth to experience new recreation activities
- b) provide volunteer and other community service opportunities

To provide opportunities for youth to get help with difficult personal and family issues.

- a) provide adult mentors to talk with teens about difficult issues
- b) provide guidance when issues are beyond staff capacity
- c) provide referrals to appropriate organizations and agencies that can provide youth with assistance

To encourage cultural diversity awareness.

- a) provide opportunities to interact with teens from other recreation centers and ethnic and cultural backgrounds

