

# Toward Making Good on All Youth: Engaging Underrepresented Youth Populations in Community Youth Development



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## About the REACH Issue Brief Series

In 2006, Sierra Health Foundation began the REACH youth development program, committing \$8 million to support the healthy development of youth in the Greater Sacramento, California, region. As a centerpiece of the larger program, seven communities in the region were awarded grants from 2006 to 2010 to assess community conditions, build community capacity for change and implement strategies that increase meaningful supports and opportunities for youth. Coalition development and direct, meaningful engagement of youth are key REACH objectives. Committed to making REACH a learning opportunity, Sierra Health Foundation asked an evaluation team from the University of California, Davis to assess the outcomes of the program and to document lessons learned. This issue brief is one of a series developed to share outcomes and lessons on topics of interest. For more information on the REACH program, visit Sierra Health Foundation's web site, [www.sierrahealth.org](http://www.sierrahealth.org). For information on the evaluation, visit the UC Cooperative Extension California Communities Program web site, <http://groups.ucanr.org/CCP/index.cfm>.

Youth who are most vulnerable to challenging community conditions, more limited opportunities and poor health, educational and economic trajectories derive especially strong benefits from engagement in community youth development efforts (Gambone, Yu, et al. 2004). In the United States, these vulnerable youth are disproportionately economically poor, youth of color, immigrant youth, LGBT youth and/or youth who have sustained experience with foster care, homelessness or the juvenile justice system. Although communities can benefit in powerful ways from the knowledge and insight of these youth populations, their experiences are often underrepresented in planning and decision making (Ginwright and James 2002, Ginwright and Cammarota 2007).

Like many community youth development efforts, the REACH Youth Program called upon grantees to address the needs of all youth. While grantees were selected to reflect the diversity of communities in the region and were encouraged to recruit youth reflecting the diversity within those communities, they were not asked in particular to reach out to their most vulnerable youth populations. Across REACH, involvement of previously un/underengaged youth was limited, albeit with important variation across places and times.

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Grantees that did engage such youth over time offer important lessons about how to create the types of safe, supportive and meaningful settings that promoted young people’s ongoing participation and leadership. Key elements of their success included:

- A. Intentionality and Commitment;
- B. Local Knowledge of Vulnerable Populations;
- C. Adult Allies with Key Capacities;
- D. Meaningful Focus;
- E. Resources for Intensive Outreach, Relationship-building and Youth Support; and
- F. Continuity of Key Adults.

This brief describes each of these elements and offers some overarching lessons learned about engaging vulnerable youth populations in community youth development. Examples are drawn from two grantees that tapped the knowledge and insights of underrepresented youth over an extended period of time.

### **A. Intentionality and Commitment**

Connecting with vulnerable youth and sustaining their engagement required an intentional commitment to do so. Grantees that were most successful made specific efforts with respect to adult and youth outreach, staff hiring, capacity building, resource allocation, objectives and youth engagement strategies with this focus in mind. In each case, their lead organization had previously worked with and on behalf of vulnerable youth and families, which facilitated their outreach process.

For example, one lead organization, a community health clinic, made an explicit decision at the outset to recruit youth who were not already in formal school and community leadership roles. They allocated resources to support a full-time staff position to focus on youth outreach and coordination, and hired a local young adult who had demonstrated strong capacity as a youth worker. Significant time was allocated to

building relationships with individual youth, among youth and between youth and adults. They also made building authentic youth participation and leadership a priority.

### **B. Local Knowledge of and Connections to Vulnerable Populations**

In order to effectively reach out to marginalized youth populations, grantees relied upon locally grounded, culturally specific understandings of who comprised this population in their community, and where/how to connect with individual youth. Publicly accessible secondary data—from education, health, housing, juvenile justice/law enforcement and youth development sectors—offers one powerful way to begin learning about disparate local youth experience. Also critical were adults who were in a position to offer and act upon a more complex understanding of the local youth populations.

For example, an adult coordinator in one rural town knew that while Latino youth as a population fare more poorly on multiple indicators of well-being, general outreach to Latino youth would not necessarily result in engagement of young people who were especially underserved or reflective of the diversity of local Latino youth experience. He found it particularly important to recognize how youth were positioned differently with respect to a variety of institutions depending on their immigration history (which could include being a first, second or third generation immigrant, or having deep family roots in the area), their own and family members’ immigration status, their household income, the nature of their relationship—if any—with (competing) gangs and whether they lived in town or in more rural parts of the area. Active, personal outreach to individual youth, when possible through adults with whom they had a relationship, was the most effective strategy for bringing a diverse group of Latino youth to the table. Once young people were involved, they were the most effective recruiters of others, reaching out through their family and friendship networks.

In a rapidly developing, multiethnic, urban fringe community with a history of racial, socioeconomic and geographic bifurcation, adult leaders focused on reaching out to young people who reflected multiple forms of local diversity. Youth outreach was pursued through a community clinic’s adult substance abuse

counseling program, successfully building on the idea that parents who were focused on improving their own and their families' health would see the youth coalition as a way to support their children's well-being. They also recruited through representatives from schools, probation and foster care services that were brought into the coalition.

### **C. Adult Allies**

The most critical factor in engaging underrepresented youth populations was the sustained leadership of adults with the ability to build authentic relationships with youth and (where possible) their parents or caretakers. These adults also fostered relationships between individual youth and the host organization, among youth participants themselves and between youth and other community adults who may be important allies in their community work—all of which were critical sets of relationships. While these individuals were positioned as “youth coordinators” in the context of REACH, we characterize them here as “adult allies,” in recognition of their deep commitment to and active support of individual youth participants and youth teams' goals of changing the conditions that undermine their own and their communities' well-being. Beyond having competencies often associated with youth work (e.g. understanding adolescent development, knowing how to adapt and facilitate appropriate activities, respecting diversity, communicating effectively with young people, appreciating and building on youth culture, etc.) (Astroth et. al 2004), these individuals brought additional capacities and commitments that proved especially important. These include: deep respect, care and expectations; a critical stance toward systems that affect youth; communication skills; shared culture, language and experience; and local networks.

#### **Respect, Care and High Expectations**

First and foremost, these adults brought a deep respect and care for the young people they sought to reach, rooted in a belief that the challenges that they had faced and/or continued to face were not reflective of their capacities; in fact, their experiences were viewed as positioning them to make important contributions to a community youth development process. Allies were able to recognize and build upon the skills, aspirations and knowledge of youth who are often seen as not

having any. With this vantage point, they held youth participants to high expectations.

At the same time, allies also recognized that many young people contend with extremely difficult circumstances and conditions, and need and deserve patient adult support to both navigate those circumstances and fulfill their potential. When young people did not meet allies' expectations, the allies worked hard to understand and address underlying causes, rather than assuming a punitive response was most appropriate.

#### **Critical Stance Toward Systems**

Allies' approach to REACH grew out of an underlying critical stance toward the systems and institutions that affect young people's lives. This stance led them to question these systems and believe that they can and must be improved. They struck a balance between viewing vulnerable young people's lives, families and communities as having been unjustly shaped by broader social, political and economic forces over time, and individual youth and communities as having the ability—with appropriate support—to make choices and act to change lives and systems.

#### **Communication Skills**

Allies brought an ability to have authentic conversations with young people about challenging circumstances; youth valued their nonjudgmental tone and focus on helping them to think through their situations, identify options and locate resources. This orientation and skill set was developed in part through specific training and experience. In one case the ally was trained as a lawyer and an advocate, and in another the ally had worked previously as a teen counselor focused on sexual health and substance abuse treatment.

#### **Shared Culture, Language and/or Experience**

Within the REACH Youth Program, these allies—through their own experience or personal networks—shared culture and language and/or background experience with the youth they sought to engage. They lived in the communities where they worked, and either grew up there or had close personal relationships with people who had grown up there. They brought personal and professional networks, along with a deeply felt commitment to the community, to bear upon their

work. Their cultural insight, existing relationships and knowledge of the local context enabled them to navigate local dynamics of power, create safe spaces for participants and build trusting relationships with youth, their families, community resources and community powerbrokers.

For example, one adult ally, who served as the youth coordinator, recognized the importance of reaching out to Latino immigrant families in order to maintain youth attendance and participation, and worked with each young person to make that connection in ways that respected family dynamics and schedules. In some cases, he allayed concerns about daughters' safety and worked out transportation plans. In others, he explained how participation in such an effort could benefit their children. For families living in fear of having members' legal status revealed, caretakers needed to know that no one would be placed in compromising situations. This ally's shared cultural background, Spanish language fluency, and ability to navigate intra-ethnic diversity enabled him to understand the importance of this step and undertake it in a manner that was comfortable for the young people and their families. Bringing parents and caretakers into the process not only increased the ability of youth to sustain their involvement, but resulted in mutually beneficial opportunities among the coalition and families (for more information about REACH engagement of families, please see Cruz and Campbell 2010).

The combination of local and cultural knowledge also was critical in creating safe spaces for young people to meet. For example, bringing young people together across gang affiliations, and with unaffiliated youth, as well as across other social and class divisions, required knowing the importance of finding neutral meeting locations, and having the ability to do so by building on young people's knowledge of how to navigate local turf. Shared language and cultural knowledge enabled the coordinator to recognize coded behavior and find respectful ways to intervene that refocused youth participants on their shared experience and objective of strengthening their community. By negotiating spatial, social and cultural dynamics to create a physically and emotionally safe space, this ally enabled participants to foster respectful relationships with peers that they might have never engaged with prior to establishing relationships within their coalition.

### **Local Networks**

Deep connections with local networks also enabled adult allies to tap information, knowledge and powerbrokers that enabled youth to navigate systems, both on their own behalf and on behalf of their community change efforts overall. Allies brought their existing networks, and made use of their coalitions to extend them.

For example, one ally was involved with an emerging neighborhood group in her ethnically and economically diverse community that includes longtime and relatively new residents looking to foster neighborhood investment and social cohesion. Through her personal involvement, she was able to create opportunities for coalition youth, many of whom live in this neighborhood, to begin participating in some neighborhood projects, which in turn led the neighborhood group to view youth as valuable partners. Their evolving relationship has resulted in several high visibility opportunities for the young people to begin working on issues of concern to them, including contributing to the city's plans for the local park and launching a neighborhood farmers market to address lack of a full-service grocery store with fresh produce nearby. They also have established relationships with a network of adults who have noted their willingness to serve as references for youth participants as needed, and shifted their orientation toward more of an intergenerational approach to community mobilization. By supporting youth in this manner, this ally helped young people further understand how systems work and how they could position themselves as active participants and change agents with respect to them. In addition, she extended the individual and collective networks of the youth team.

### **D. Meaningful Focus**

Alongside a commitment to adult allies and their appreciation of the emotionally and physically safe environments they helped create, youth participants cited their desire to help others and make a real difference in their communities as key reasons for their sustained involvement. Adult allies and coalition partners worked with youth to identify community social and institutional systems that were affecting their lives in significant ways. By building on their knowledge and experience to begin envisioning alternatives, youth

participants began to question these systems. Learning more about them enabled youth to make choices about aspects of the systems they wanted to act upon, and make decisions about their approaches to doing so.

Young people's efforts evolved in a variety of ways, including more focused projects—for example, a mural project on a wall regularly tagged by local gangs celebrating the role of farm workers in local history—and longer-term strategies. Longer-term strategies included bringing youth perspectives to bear upon local decision making by helping to revive a youth commission, advocating for student votes on the school board and producing policy recommendations for community planners using photovoice. Youth and their adult allies also recognized that developing relationships among participating youth, particularly in the context of deep and consequential social divisions, was not only an important process, but potentially a powerful youth and community outcome unto itself. In each case, their strategies both built on youth experience and knowledge *and* provided new knowledge, skill and access to social networks with additional resources. For example, the mural project relied on youth participants' input regarding the location and content, as well as their social networks, which they employed to identify interviewees who could inform the content and to encourage taggers not to destroy the work. In turn, the project affirmed their identity, validated their culture and provided a space for their artistic abilities to flourish under the guidance of a local Latino artist, who also became an adult ally.

As part of the planning process, youth presented a proposal to the city for a vote and discussed the benefits of the mural with community members who did not appreciate the emphasis on farm worker contributions. This process familiarized participants with the system of city codes, engaged them in a formal civic decision-making process and provided an opportunity to surface, discuss and challenge local race and class dynamics. The mural continues to provoke local conversation, and several youth participants have become regulars at a new Latino arts studio in town that is coordinated by local university faculty.

## **E. Resource Allocation**

Engaging and sustaining the involvement of youth required resources—in particular, ally time, skill-building support, a flexible timeline and funding.

### **Ally Time**

As noted above, adult allies dedicated significant time to outreach, relationship building and information sharing. Youth living in low-income households where family members were unable to work or working multiple jobs, youth whose parents/caretakers were unable to read or read informational materials written in English, and youth in group homes/foster care and homeless youth did not always have access to adult logistical support at home (e.g. transportation, phones, parents tracking activity schedules). The region and individual communities did not offer convenient public transportation. In this context, key adults played important roles helping young people remember schedules and get where they needed to be.

As their trust of adult allies deepened, young people inevitably turned to them for help with challenges they were negotiating. Examples that emerged during the grant period included legal issues associated with immigration status, abuse, being at risk of not graduating from high school, tensions concerning gang affiliation and dealing with police harassment, etc. Supporting young people in these circumstances and connecting them with additional support takes time, often in ways that do not conform to a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. work schedule.

### **Skill-building Support**

Skills and knowledge that are often important elements of community change efforts—for example, those associated with envisioning alternative systems, policymaking and policy implementation processes, community organizing, community research, etc.—are likely to be unfamiliar to many youth and adults. Young people who have been disengaged from and/or underserved by school and have had limited opportunity to develop skills such as academic literacy, public speaking, writing, project planning, meeting participation, etc., are likely to require significant additional skill-building support. By creating opportunities to develop these skills in the context of

projects that were meaningful to participants and *also* built on the considerable knowledge and skill that youth already brought to this work, allies avoided a deficit-oriented approach that merely positioned participants as lacking in ability.

Vulnerable youth often are vulnerable in large part because they and their communities have been marginalized by social and institutional systems. It follows that their recommendations for needed changes are likely to challenge entrenched interests. Anticipating this to be the case and ensuring that allies and other adult resources are prepared to support young people's navigation of these dynamics emerged as another critical step in supporting and sustaining their participation and success.

### **Funding**

Coordinator time and skill-building support were, as noted above, critical investments associated with these grantees' success. Ensuring that young people were able to fully participate regardless of their families' financial resources required that coalitions allocate funds to cover all costs associated with participation. This included activity costs, substantial after-school snacks and meals, project materials, transportation and equipment required by particular activities (e.g. warm jackets and sleeping bags for attending a camp program). In addition, in both of these cases coalitions and lead agencies decided to pay young people stipends for their participation. Highly engaged participants were clear that the paycheck was not their sole rationale for staying involved. However, being paid honoraria did enable older youth, who might otherwise have needed to find paying work, to sustain their involvement. For youth without access to discretionary funds, their paychecks were an important source of revenue and, in some cases, contributions to family income.

### **Flexible Timelines**

Paying careful attention to outreach, developing trusting relationships among youth and between youth and adult participants, cultivating networks, building complex skills and selecting and pursuing meaningful projects takes time. For young people who also are negotiating unstable or challenging life circumstances and/or working in an unfamiliar language and cultural context,

these processes may require additional time and flexibility—even the opportunity to take time out and then re-connect.

Grantees who engaged vulnerable youth in sustained ways worked hard to create time and make resources available for all these processes and activities. The will and ability of lead fiscal agencies, who were also the employers of youth coordinators, to have flexible policies with respect to resource allocation (e.g. paying for snacks), transporting youth and work hours, were also important enabling factors. Because this type of effort does not lend itself to rapid, or even easily measurable, results, another key to success was the recognition of its value by funders, administrators and adult partners.

### **F. Adult Ally Continuity**

As suggested above, building the knowledge and relationships required for sustained youth engagement and meaningful activity is deeply personal, and adult allies play a pivotal role. In many cases, young people came to rely on allies as trusted sources of life support, as well as guides of their community work. Other adults in coalition, community and institutional settings came to rely on allies as their bridge to youth participants. The process of reaching this point demands significant investment of resources. Because adult allies are such a critical locus of these relationships and activities, the continuity of their leadership is also an important factor in maintaining young people's involvement. Among the two cases described in this brief, one grantee was able to maintain and build upon the participating youth team in the context of stable youth coordinator staffing; the other coalition experienced complete turnover of the youth team within the six months following their coordinator's departure.

The centrality of adult allies has several important implications for community youth development efforts. First, while direct youth worker positions are often positioned lower down on a managerial hierarchy of coordination, these positions are in fact core leadership roles. Individuals who are succeeding in this role are an important focus of investment, professional development and retention strategies. For example, one REACH grantee has taken specific steps to build a ladder of professional opportunity that is moving an

ally into increasingly responsible leadership roles in the overall coalition effort, while ensuring adequate support to develop skill in organizational development and leadership arenas that are less familiar.

No single ally will be able to address all the needs for support that vulnerable young people are likely to raise. Therefore supporting allies in this work requires that they have access to information about other resources for youth, as well as support for their own emotional

well-being if they are helping young people navigate particularly difficult situations. Finally, limiting reliance on one person by having multiple adults engaged as adult allies, identifying and cultivating others in an ongoing way, and fully engaging youth participants in hiring and orienting new staff will help facilitate a transition in the case that a central individual needs to move on.

## Conclusion

The REACH Youth Program offers both a cautionary note and powerful lessons with respect to engaging underrepresented youth populations in community youth development. First, like other education and youth development efforts, REACH illustrates that an emphasis on serving all youth in the context of community youth development does not necessarily result in a focus on vulnerable youth populations' interests, needs and assets. This tendency holds at least three dangers. First, vulnerable youth miss out on activities that offer much needed support and access to resources that can facilitate transformation of their trajectories. Second, communities miss out on the critical resources that vulnerable youth can bring to community change strategies. Finally, when community youth development efforts that do not engage vulnerable youth offer up "youth input" without attending to the ways that different youth populations may be having very different experiences within the same community or institutional setting, they run the risk of further marginalizing vulnerable populations.

REACH grantees that fostered leadership among more vulnerable youth populations reflect an emerging orientation toward what Ginwright and Cammarota call a "critical civic praxis," which intentionally provides vulnerable youth access to the networks, ideas and experiences that build individual and collective capacity to pursue social justice for their communities (Ginwright and Cammarota 2007, 694). These grantees drew in effective ways on well-documented youth development practices (e.g. food, icebreakers, skill-building, youth participation, youth-adult relationship building activities, etc.) and community youth development strategies (e.g. civic participation, youth philanthropy, community service, public art). In addition, they marshaled local capacities and foundation resources in ways that reflected a deep concern and respect for their communities' most vulnerable youth populations, and a belief that their insights and well-being are central elements of community change processes that will foster healthy environments.

## For More Information

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