



# National Association for State Community Services Programs

ISSUE BRIEF

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## Community Action Agencies Intervene on Behalf of the Nation's Youth

By Jovita A. Tolbert

### Overview

Recent statistics show that America's children are facing a growing number of alarming challenges. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, after a decade of decline, the number of low-income children in the United States is on the rise. In 2003, almost 27 million U.S. children and youth were living in low-income families. And, of this 27 million, more than 11 million were living in extremely poor families. These figures are representative of an increasing number of the nation's population that are unable to have their basic needs, such as food and housing, met.<sup>1</sup>

Notably, youth ages 10-19, in particular, are faring poorly in other areas as well. On the education front, data shows that only 70 percent of all students in public high schools graduate, and only 32 percent of these students leave high school qualified and prepared to attend a four-year college.<sup>2</sup> Concerning youth safety, the second leading cause of death among 10 to 24 year olds is homicide.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in regard to the health of America's youth, in 2002, 53 percent of twelfth graders reported that they had used an illicit drug in their lifetime. In addition, the United States has the highest rate of teen pregnancy and births in the western industrialized world and each year 3 million teens contract a sexually transmitted disease (STD). In fact, American youth between the ages of 13 and 24 are contracting HIV at the rate of 2 per hour.<sup>4</sup>

Information provided by the White House's *Helping America's Youth* Initiative, headed by Mrs. Laura Bush, echoes this data as it suggests that "many of the nation's youth are at-risk." According to the White House's *Making a Difference for America's Youth* Fact Sheet:

**Making A Difference For America's Youth Fact Sheet**

- Youth who fall behind in reading have a greater chance of dropping out of high school altogether.

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### Making A Difference For America's Youth Fact Sheet (Cont.)

- Each year, there are approximately 15 million new STD cases in the U.S., and about one-quarter of these are teenagers.
- Half of all new HIV infections affect those 24 and younger and almost 900,000 women under the age of 19 become pregnant every year.
- Injury and violence is the leading cause of death among youth aged 5-19: Motor vehicle crashes account for 31% of all deaths among youth aged 5-19, and alcohol and other drug use is a factor in approximately 41% of all deaths from motor vehicle crashes.
- In addition, more children are growing up without a father involved in their lives, and studies show an overwhelming number of violent criminals in the United States grew up without fathers involved in their lives.

Source: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/03/20050307-5.html>

#### Introduction

President and Mrs. Laura Bush have often expressed their desire to help America's youth. During the State of the Union address on February 2, 2005, President Bush declared, "Now we need to focus on giving young people, especially young men in our cities, better options than apathy, or gangs, or jail." The President then went on to propose a three-year initiative to help organizations keep youth out of gangs as part of a broader outreach to youth which would involve parents and pastors, coaches and community leaders, in programs ranging from literacy to recreational activities.<sup>5</sup> This \$150 million nationwide initiative will endeavor to reduce gang violence by encouraging young people to remain crime free.

#### Responses to Youth Issues

The aforementioned initiative is a part of the President's *Helping America's Youth* Initiative which will be led by Mrs. Laura Bush. This initiative is comprised of three components: the importance of family, the importance of school, and the importance of community.

Believing that family is the first and most important influence in a child's life the President has set aside \$40 million for a new fatherhood initiative and \$200 million for state-based healthy marriage programs, research and technical assistance for family formation and healthy marriage activities to encourage the importance of family.

To promote the importance of school, the President's FY 2006 budget includes \$200 million for a Striving Readers initiative which focuses on improving the reading skills of high school students who

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read below grade level. In addition, the President has appealed for \$24 million for a Character Education Initiative which would provide youth with the tools to develop moral and ethical strength.

Noting that the needs of at-risk youth will be addressed by those in the community as well as their families, in the FY 2006 budget the President proposed \$50 million for mentoring the youth of prisoners and \$206 million for a youth abstinence initiative. The President and Mrs. Laura Bush's initiative to help youth resist gang influence is also included under this importance of communities component.

Additionally, Mrs. Laura Bush announced that a White House Conference for Helping America's Youth would be convened in the fall to assist in the creation of a new guide entitled, "Community Guide to Helping America's Youth: An Assessment Tool for Youth Outreach."

### **Responses of Community Action Agencies**

The Community Services Network was born at the enactment of the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964. This statute's aim was to eliminate the causes and consequences of poverty in the United States. To accomplish this goal, the Act established Community Action Agencies (CAAs), which are community-based anti-poverty agencies. In 1981, the program evolved to a block grant entitled the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG). The federal Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) Office of Community Services (OCS) allocates the CSBG to the states who in turn administer the CSBG to a network of CAAs. These agencies, which are the core of the Community Services Network, work to alleviate poverty on a community level.

Today, the Community Services Network is comprised of nearly 1,100 local, private, non-profit and public agencies that work to alleviate poverty and empower low-income families in communities throughout the United States. Most of these agencies are CAAs created through the EOA of 1964. The balance, included under the Community Services Block Grant, follow similar guidelines for structure and service. CAAs currently serve over 16 million low-income people yearly in 96 percent of the nation's counties.

Notably, CAAs are required by statute to provide services for the nation's youth. According to Sec. 676 of the Community Opportunities, Accountability, Training, and Educational Services (COATES) Act of 1998, CAAs have a statutory duty to

*“(B) to address the needs of youth in low-income communities through youth development programs that support the primary role of the family, give priority to the prevention of youth problems and crime, and promote increased community coordination and collaboration in meeting the needs of youth, and support development and expansion of innovative community-based youth development programs that have demonstrated success in preventing or reducing youth crime, such as-*

*“(i) programs for the establishment of violence-free zones that would involve youth development and intervention models (such as models involving youth mediation, youth mentoring, life skills training, job creation, and entrepreneurship programs);*

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and ; “(ii) after-school child care programs; and  
“(C) to make more effective use of, and to coordinate with, other programs related to the  
purposes of this subtitle (including State welfare reform efforts);

Therefore, CAAs provide education, volunteerism, employment, housing, gang prevention, recreation and other programs for youth. In FY 2004, CAAs spent a total of nearly \$46 million of CSBG funding on the provision of youth programs. Moreover, in FY 2004, CAAs served nearly 4 million youth who ranged in age from 0 to 17. Below are several examples of the diverse and innovative youth programs provided by CAAs around the United States.

### **South Carolina**

*Youth Leadership Program:* Sunbelt Human Advancement Resources, Inc. (SHARE), one of the eleven community action agencies within South Carolina operating the State's Youth Leadership CSBG discretionary project, serves as a model of success. SHARE's Youth Leadership Program is operated through partnership with the Office of Economic Opportunity-the State Community Services Block Grant administrator, and the School District of Greenville County. The Office of Economic Opportunity provided the agency with \$32,754 from CSBG funds to operate its 2004 Youth Leadership Program. Staff from the School District of Greenville County helped identify eligible participants and collect required documentation. The school district also graciously provided the needed space, after regular school hours, in which the class sessions are held.

SHARE's Youth Leadership Class of 2004 consisted of 29 students from two public high schools in South Carolina's Greenville County, Byrnes High and Greenville High schools. Of these 29 youth, 16 were seniors who had been participants of Youth Leadership for up to four years. Each of these students came from low-income families, and most were members of single parent-female headed households who resided in public housing. The sixteen seniors of the Youth Leadership class participated in the character building sessions on a regular basis, engaging themselves in the learning activities that focused on the "Six Pillars of Character." With the support of SHARE's Youth Leadership program, twelve of the sixteen seniors are now enrolled in colleges across South Carolina. The remaining four seniors graduated from high school and are working toward developing a career or training for their life's work. These program outcomes were made possible almost entirely through Community Services Block Grant funding.

### **District of Columbia**

*Traditional Woodwork Training:* The Artisans Program at Covenant House responds to an urgent need for adequate and appropriate vocational alternatives to serve youth, age 16-21, who for whatever reason, have become disconnected from the education system and, in most instances, have failed to obtain a high school diploma. The "Artisans Program" prepares homeless and at-risk youth for employment in the millwork trades with one-on-one training and employment placement through the "Artisans Workshop." This unique pre-employment training program provides each Artisan with high quality, intensive instruction in the techniques and craft of traditional furniture making and cabinetry, in a professional-grade hands-on learning environment. Completion of this six-month training program results in employment placement with one of the partner employers. This employment placement is carefully monitored by the Washington Employment Development Unit of Covenant House, and all graduates are followed for up to one year post completion. Two classes

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of six youth attend programs offered at the "Artisans Workshop" on a daily basis, with 24 served annually. The ratio of staff to youth is 1:3.

CSBG funding totaling \$34,286 was awarded to this program in fiscal year 2004. CSBG funds support staff positions, youth travel and occupancy costs. Other revenue for the program includes: \$68,000 from the Corporate Direct Mail campaign; \$26,000 from the D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation; \$69,000 from Action to Rehabilitate Community Housing (ARCH) supports Artisans with training stipends and employment referrals as a function of their Youth Build Program; \$18,000 from the sale of Artisan Enterprise Projects; and \$22,820 from Covenant House Washington Reserves. The Artisans have recently launched an enterprise, creating beautiful engraved boxes, awards and incentive items. For additional information on this unique program or to order awards handcrafted by youth for your agency, please email [artisans@chdc.org](mailto:artisans@chdc.org), or phone (202) 610-6519.

### **Arkansas**

*Abstinence Program:* The Office of Human Concern, Inc. was concerned about the unmarried birth rate of their Carroll County youth. As a result, they created the *Abstinence Program of the Ozarks*. The purpose of this program was to lower the pregnancy rate for teens in Carroll County. To accomplish this goal, the Office of Human Concern, Inc. worked with schools, churches, community-based organizations, and the Arkansas Department of Health to provide educational forums for youth to address teen pregnancy. Through partnership with three public schools, the Abstinence Education Program of the Ozarks taught classes of 100 plus youth to abstain from sex.

The Office of Human Concern, Inc. uses its Community Services Block Grant funds for planning, fiscal management and program operation support and spent \$10,300 in Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) funds supporting the abstinence program to reduce teen pregnancy and lower the unmarried birth rate.

### **Massachusetts**

*Compass Youth Program:* Action Inc.'s Compass Youth Program is designed to teach personal and professional life-skills to at-risk youth on Cape Ann. The project helps youth to earn their high school diplomas, develop career interests, and pursue higher education. An essential part of our program this year was the summer employment component. Since many of the youth at Compass score quite high in the arts, and also in the carpentry/crafts categories of the Harrington O'Shea Career Profile, the Compass Youth Program Director found summer internships for them that would nurture their creative spirit. Through the funding of the Workforce Investment Board, Action, Inc., was able to pay these youth to intern with community organizations during the summer. In addition, Action, Inc. was able to provide them with weekly workshops and case management that related directly to their summer employment experience and their long-term career goals. Moreover, youth participated in a new component to the Compass Youth Program called The Shakedown Street Boutique. This Boutique allowed the youth to gain work experience in arts and crafts and it gave them an opportunity to make money as well. The Shakedown Street Boutique is a

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micro-business that turns junk into jewels. The youth bring in old furniture, repair it and decorate it. Each piece is an original piece of art that is signed by the artist and is testimony to Action's philosophy that one can be monetarily poor, but not be surrounded by poverty. Action, Inc., launched a micro-business this summer with a table at the Gloucester Sidewalk Bazaar and had tremendous positive feedback, including a Rockport gallery owner asking to display some of the pieces in his gallery. Action is currently transforming the front window office into a boutique and it will be a part of a fall class on Micro-Entrepreneurship that will be offered for high school credit. The youth at Compass will learn how to run a small business, how to write a business plan, set up their books, and create a high quality product. CSBG funds are used to support the administrative costs of this program.

## California

*Free Tutoring Services:* The Long Beach Community Development Corporation serves youth enrolled in the Long Beach Unified School District that are currently experiencing insufficient grades through its Long Beach Tutorial Academy. Many students are referred to the Long Beach Tutorial Academy from partner schools after receiving a quarterly progress report or semester report card bearing one or more failing grade. The Long Beach Tutorial Academy, on average, is successful in assisting approximately 80 percent of those students to increase overall academic performance, and raise failing grades to at least "C" grades, by the next report card issuance.

In one case, a middle school referred 43 8th grade students to the Tutorial Academy who would not be promoted to high school, due to earning multiple failing class grades on their last progress report. Long Beach Tutorial Academy staff worked with the students to ensure that they understood each of their class lessons, completed their homework, and participated in academic enrichment activities to supplement classroom instruction. As a result of these efforts, 40 of those 43 students graduated with their class, and were promoted to high school. The Long Beach Tutorial Academy Program partners include four schools within the Long Beach Unified School District: Franklin Middle School, Washington Middle School, Stevenson Elementary School, and Jordan High School. CSBG funding currently supports 95 percent of the annual operating costs of this program.

## Indiana

*Youth Court Mediation Program:* The Community Action Mediation Program administered by Community Action of Greater Indianapolis, Inc. Through this program, juvenile offenders attend classes focused on character building, values clarification, and anger management, as a last chance effort before being sent to Boys School or Girls School. Following completion of the classes, the participants attend an after-care program. If they happen to relapse, they are referred back to the Juvenile Court System and are not allowed to return without permission from the Court. The impact on the participants and their families is remarkable. Participants seem to do better in school, have stronger relationships with their families, friends and teachers, and many make plans for the future (graduation, college, trade school, etc.).

The CSBG provides \$62,697 for the Community Action Mediation Program which is the majority of the funding for the program.

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## Hawaii

*Language Arts Multicultural Program:* Hawaii County Economic Opportunity Council's (HCEOC) Language Arts Multicultural Program aims to help disadvantaged underachieving students improve language arts skills, develop positive attitudes toward learning, develop multicultural awareness, prepare and perform successfully at grade level and involves parents in the educational process. In partnership with the State Department of Education, the program services students at Kapiolani and Keaau Elementary Schools. During the regular school day, as coordinated with the principal and classroom teachers at each school, the Language Arts Multicultural Program Staff assists the regular school teacher to provide individual and group tutoring and instruction. During the after school hours, the staff provides homework help, basic language instruction and multicultural activities. During the school year, parents volunteer time to perform cultural and craft demonstrations and to chaperone field trips and tutoring during center hours. Staff also make home visits and communicate constantly via written notes and telephone. This project demonstrates the importance of involving different sectors of the community in the education of the youth. Moreover, it is an example of what can be done when school officials, parents and community agencies such as HCEOC, cooperate and work with each other to mobilize resources.

All students in the Language Arts Multicultural Program are underachievers in reading and writing and are referred to the program by school authorities. Notably, the program success rate is 75 percent and many students attain honor roll even after leaving the program. CSBG provides core funding for managerial and clerical positions on percentage of time for the HCEOC Language Arts Multicultural Program.

## Kentucky

*YouthBuild:* In FY 2004, the Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission began the YouthBuild Program primarily funded through a grant from Housing and Urban Development. The YouthBuild Program serves at-risk youth ages 16-24 years old in a three county area who are high school dropouts or high school graduates with educational needs to enter into the workforce. The youth are provided with ten hours of classroom instruction and ten hours of building instruction, while developing carpenter skills each week.

The first building project completed in FY 2004, was the rehabilitation of the After School Center, an educational center utilized by individuals and families working toward their General Education Diploma or vocational instruction. A group of partners, Gateway Community Technical College, Housing Authority of Covington, Transitions, Inc., Children's Inc., Welcome House, Women's Crisis Center, North Key, Brighton Center, Homebuilders Association, City of Covington, Recovery Network, Southwest Ohio Educational Opportunities Center, Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Kentucky Cabinet for Workforce Development, Forward Quest, Northern Kentucky Area Development District, Camabeam & Associates and The Hispanic Resource Center, sharing resources totaling \$291,800, committed their agencies to support the YouthBuild Program. The Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission utilizes \$46,887 of CSBG funding for CSBG outreach workers. The CSBG Outreach Worker provides recruitment and case management services to the youth and their families.

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## Louisiana

*Alternative K-12 School:* Located in Hammond, LA, one of Quad Area Community Action Agency's successful youth programs, is its alternative school entitled the St. Amant Academy. The St. Amant Academy serves low-income K-12 students who need a private school education but cannot afford it. These low-income children usually have special needs or are children who have been expelled from the public school system. Students at St. Amant Academy gain at least one educational level and show improvement in conduct and attitudes. Since its inception, St. Amant Academy has grown to the point that it now serves over 400 students annually with a success rate of over 85%. Last year, the Academy had an astounding 305 graduates. Of this number, 98 graduates went on to post-secondary institutions, while another 68 graduates joined the military.

Notably, St. Amant Academy has great academics, a youth recreation program, teen pregnancy prevention program, Children Trust Fund, and other funding streams that mesh into a great and outstanding program that salvages the lives of many severed from the public school system. CSBG provides core funds in the amount of \$75,000 which is utilized to supply staff, materials, equipment, facilities and other supplies for the Academy.

## Alaska

*Youth Wellness Program:* The annual *Rural Providers' Conference*, sponsored in part by RurAL CAP, is a strong collaboration that addresses youth and elder's prevention and wellness. Individuals of all ages from around the state gathered in early June 2004 in Seward, Alaska for the Rural Providers' Conference which had concurrent Youth and Culture Camp tracks. The tracks included demonstrations of traditional and cultural ways of life, traditional story telling, subsistence activities, and the sharing of family values and healthy life choices.

The Culture Camp at the 2004 Rural Providers' Conference provided an opportunity to share experiences and cultural ways of life in a larger group setting. The Culture Camp was not a project funded in the traditional sense, rather it was funded by the contributions of time, food, supplies and the energy of the participants – elders and youth who share and learn from one another. The youth also learned team building skills, values sharing and problem solving skills. The Community Services Block Grant provides core funding to the Rural Providers' Conference by covering the travel costs for staff to coordinate and support this mainstay of the Alaska Native Sobriety Movement.

## Minnesota

*BMX Bike and Skateboard Recreational Facility:* When the Thief River Falls community recognized the need for a youth recreation facility, Inter-County Community Action led the way to better results than they had ever hoped for. An Inter-County Job Training Specialist worked in collaboration with the Pathfinder program, the Northwest Mental Health Center, and the Thief River Falls School District to develop a BMX bike and skateboard recreational area. The workers came from Pathfinders, a group home for youth, ages 14-17 with ongoing behavior problems. These youth workers were also enrolled in the Inter-County Employment and Training Program, which helps low-income, disadvantaged and troubled youth to overcome barriers. The Inter-County Youth

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Employment and Training Program provided funds for wages and leadership in project direction. They also helped the youth workers develop job skills that will carry-over after graduation from high school.

The program uses CSBG funds as support for program operation, which has become increasingly more difficult following severe cuts at both the State and Federal levels. The Youth workers were involved throughout all phases of project development – from initial planning, to building, to final implementation. In addition to the job development skills, the participants received credit for community service time and were given academic credit for their participation from the school district. The completed project extended to include the only bicycle repair and bait shop in the town and continues to provide a positive work site for troubled youth.

### **North Dakota**

*Teen Courts:* Two CAAs in North Dakota, Community Action Opportunities and Community Action Program Region VII, have implemented Teen Court programs which provide first time non-violent youth offenders an option. Youth who plead guilty to the charges brought against them can participate in Teen Court instead of going through the usual juvenile justice system proceedings. The youth are sentenced by a jury of his/her peers. Youth must be referred by juvenile court, law enforcement, parents or the school. Community volunteers are critical to the success of this program. The Teen Court programs in the two agencies reported a combined total of 633 hours provided by volunteers with the Teen Court program in 2004. Funding for the programs comes from foundation grants, donations by local clubs and organizations, and support for staff time, administration and program operations from CSBG. The agencies have seen an increase in referrals being made to the program because youth are taking the program seriously and following through with their sentencing.

### **Conclusion**

As demonstrated in the above youth program overviews, CAAs provide a wide-range of youth services and are continually finding inventive ways to reach and serve America's youth. The impact of these efforts on youth served by Community Action is evident in outcome data collected in the FY 2004 CSBG Information System Survey and published in the *Annual Report of Performance Outcomes from the CSBG Program*:

- 42,972 “before” or “after” school program slots for low-income youth were created or saved from elimination;
- 74,284 youth experienced improved physical health, growth and development;
- 44,321 youth experienced improved social/emotional development;
- 70,556 youth increased their academic, athletic, or social skills by participating in “before” or “after” school programs;
- 27,737 youth avoided risk-taking behavior for a defined period of time; and

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- 12,625 youth had reduced involvement with the criminal justice system.

As part of the larger goal of assisting vulnerable populations in achieving their potential by strengthening family and other supportive systems, CAAs have been providing youth services since their inception and will continue to intervene on behalf of youth as not only a statutory duty, but also as an essential and strategic means of eliminating the cycle of poverty in the United States.

<sup>1</sup> Ayana Douglas– Hall and Heather Koball. “ Basic Facts About Low-Income Children: Birth to Age 18.” National Center for Children in Poverty. Jul 2005, Online. <[http://www.nccp.org/pub\\_lic05.html](http://www.nccp.org/pub_lic05.html)>

<sup>2</sup> Jay Greene and George Forster. “Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States.” Texas Education Review. Winter 2003-04, Online. <<http://www.educationreview.homestead.com/2003GraduationRates.html>>

<sup>3</sup> “Youth Violence Fact Sheet.” National Center for Injury Control and Prevention. 2003, Online. <<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/yvfacts.htm>>

<sup>4</sup> SADD. “Statistics-Sex, Teen Pregnancy, STD’s, HIV/AIDS.” <<http://www.saddonline.com/stats.htm#sex>>

<sup>5</sup> White House. “State of the Union Address.” Feb 2, 2005, Online. <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>>

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