

**Comments of the National Association of County and City Health Officials
On the Federal Register Notice 2010-31975
from the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Secretary
Re: The Strategic Plan for Federal Youth Policy**

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is pleased to submit the following input in response to the Federal Register Notice 2010-31975 on the Strategic Plan of Federal Youth Policy.

NACCHO is the national organization representing the nation's 2,800 local health departments (LHDs) and its vision is health, equity, and well-being for all people in their communities through public health policies and service. NACCHO's mission is to be a leader, partner, catalyst, and voice for LHDs in order to ensure the conditions that promote health and equity, combat disease, and improve the quality and length of all lives. Among their various functions, LHDs work to protect, promote, and improve the health and well-being of youth and their families.

NACCHO commends the Department of Health and Human Services, and partnering federal agencies involved in the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, on their collaborative efforts to improve programs and policies designed to meet the needs of youth. NACCHO applauds these efforts and appreciates the opportunity to provide input on the development of a strategic plan to inform federal youth policy that seeks to positively impact the lives of our Nation's youth.

On behalf of the Nation's 2,800 LHDs, NACCHO presents the following responses and comments to the guiding questions outlined in the Federal Register Notice 2010-31975.

Responses to Guiding Questions Posed by the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs

What is the single most important thing youth need to be successful?

NACCHO supports initiatives and programs that that seek to develop youth assets by enhancing connections between adolescents and caring adults, including parents/guardians and other positive community role models.¹ Forming a caring, sustainable and positive relationship with a trusted adult is the single most important thing that youth need to be successful. Adolescence is a critical period where youth begin to develop assets such as social skills, values, and competencies that are necessary to smoothly transition into adulthood. Beginning to determine their roles in society and to make choices about their future, youth are receptive to the influences present in the world in which they inhabit. A meaningful connection to a trusted adult can help equip adolescents with healthy behaviors that they can carry into adulthood.



What programs really make a difference in the lives of youth? How do you know this?

In addition to those programs that seek to develop youth assets by both enhancing connections between adolescents and caring adults (as discussed above), the literature shows that programs that promote emotional, behavioral and cognitive development in youth in order to facilitate their successful transition into adulthood rather than just focusing on avoiding problem behaviors are those that make a significant difference in the lives of youth.² Such Positive Youth Development (PYD) approaches to programming encourage youth to realize and utilize their own internal strengths and assets in order to bring about positive health and well-being. The PYD approach focuses on building: competence (in one's self and actions), confidence, connection (to family, school, community, caring adults, etc.), character, and caring/compassion in youth, enhancing their ability and desire to make positive contributions to society as well as their own lives.³ Efforts designed to help build these characteristics in youth, which focus on promoting skills and assets of adolescents instead of preventing deficits, are more likely to help youth realize their potential and avoid effects of negative influences.⁴

What are the barriers to collaborating to improve youth outcomes and how can these barriers be removed?

The high prevalence of categorical-based funding streams for youth-centered initiatives is one of the barriers impacting the ability for partners to collaborate at the local, state and national levels to improve youth outcomes. While these categorical funding streams enable LHDs and other youth serving organizations to make an impact on issues such as teen pregnancy and youth violence, the focus on addressing specific categories of youth risk behavior engenders categorical silos, often limiting the establishment of multidisciplinary partnerships to address youth issues. Providing funding and support for initiatives focused on the broad goal of improving youth health and well-being can help to remove this specific barrier.

An additional barrier to collaborating to improve youth outcomes is the lack of consistent funding programs available to support programs aimed at improving the health and well-being of youth. Just as youth benefit from consistency in their lives, programs intending to improve youth outcomes have a higher probability of being successful when supported by consistent, sustained funding streams. Ensuring that funding programs dedicated to supporting programs focused on improving youth outcomes have consistent funding will remedy this problem.

What can Federal agencies do to assist? What are your ideas for Federal policy to improve the coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency of programs affecting youth?

To improve the coordination, effectiveness and efficiency of programs affecting youth, NACCHO urges federal legislators and agencies to enact policies and funding streams that enable LHDs and other youth-serving organizations to establish and maintain initiatives that focus on the broad goal of improving youth health and well-being versus those that solely approach the issue of youth health from categorical standpoint. Additionally, to eliminate current silos and encourage multiagency collaboration around issues affecting youth, these funding streams should include requirements instructing grantees to collaborate with

multidisciplinary groups of partners to reach a common goal of improving youth outcomes. Current federal efforts such as the Centers for Disease Control's ACHIEVE communities program and the Health Resources and Services Administration's Partners in Program Planning for Adolescent Health (PIPPAH) out of its Maternal and Child Health Bureau are just a few examples of successful federal initiatives that have included multidisciplinary collaboration as a funding requirement.

To help foster multidisciplinary collaboration, communication and coordination at the local and state level, federal agencies can increase their own efforts to conduct collaborative, cross-agency efforts to address youth outcomes. For example, federal agencies such as the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services can collaborate to pool together resources and funding to support initiatives focused on the broad goal of improving youth outcomes. This type of multiagency collaboration can serve as an example to youth serving organizations functioning at local and state levels, encouraging agencies at those levels to adopt similar collaborative approaches.

How can youth be engaged in these efforts?

In addition to including components that encourage positive youth-adult relationships, research on youth programming suggest that effective youth programs include components that encourage youth to be involved in various aspects of program design and planning.⁵ To engage youth in national efforts to improve youth outcomes, NACCHO suggests that the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs explore the idea of creating a national youth advisory board designed to provide youth from around the nation with the opportunity to provide guidance on national efforts affecting the lives of youth.

Summary

- NACCHO supports initiatives and programs that seek to develop youth assets by enhancing connections between adolescents and caring adults, including parents/guardians and other positive community role models.
- Programs that promote emotional, behavioral and cognitive development in youth in order to facilitate their successful transition into adulthood rather than just focusing on avoiding problem behaviors are those that make a significant difference in the lives of youth.
- NACCHO urges federal legislators and agencies to enact policies and funding streams that enable LHDs and other youth-serving organizations to establish and maintain initiatives that focus on improving the health of youth by enhancing positive youth assets and resiliency.

NACCHO supports the efforts of the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs to improve youth outcomes and looks forward to reviewing final Strategic Plan for Federal Youth Policy. If needed, NACCHO and its LHD members are available to serve as a resource in future endeavors aimed at strengthening collaboration at the local, state and Federal level in order to improve the health and well-being of the Nation's youth.

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¹ NACCHO. Statement of Policy: Positive Youth Development Approaches to Adolescent Health Programs. <http://www.naccho.org/advocacy/positions/upload/09-05-Positive-Youth-Development.pdf>

² Catalano, RF et al. Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Jan 2004; 591: 98 - 124.

³ Lerner, R.M. et al. Positive Youth Development, Participation in Community Youth Development Programs, and Community Contributions of Fifth-Grade Adolescents: Findings From the First Wave of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. *J of Early Adolescence*. 2005; 25: 17-71

⁴ Scales, PC & Leffert N. *Developmental assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*. Minneapolis: Search Institute. 1999

⁵ Lerner, R.M. (2004). *Liberty: Thriving and civic engagement among America's youth*. Liberty: Thriving and civic engagement among American youth. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.