

09-05

## STATEMENT OF POLICY

### Positive Youth Development Approaches in Adolescent Health Programs

#### Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) urges the use of positive youth development (PYD) approaches in programs that seek to improve the health and well-being of adolescents. Specifically, NACCHO supports initiatives and programs that seek to develop youth assets by both enhancing connections between adolescents and caring adults, including parents/guardians and other positive community role models, and engaging youth in various aspects of programming (i.e. design, planning, implementation, evaluation). NACCHO urges local, state, and federal legislators to enact policies and funding streams that enable local health departments (LHDs) to establish and maintain initiatives that focus on improving the health of adolescents by enhancing positive youth assets and resiliency versus solely focus on decreasing the occurrence of youth problem behavior.

#### Justification

While most adolescents are generally healthy, today's youth live in a society where they face more choices and challenges than preceding generations. For today's adolescents, the transition from childhood to adolescence brings a 300 percent increase in morbidity and mortality with the vast majority of these threats being associated with preventable behaviors.<sup>1</sup> In addition to individual level risk factors, environmental factors, such as high levels of community violence, poverty, inadequate school systems, and negative aspects of media and technology, can make it difficult for some adolescents to navigate this crucial age period.<sup>2,3</sup> Although adolescents face a great deal of risk during this transition, this period is also a time of immense opportunity. Adolescence is the point where youth begin to develop assets such as social skills, values, and competencies that are necessary for a smooth transition into adulthood. Beginning to determine their roles in society and to make choices about their future, adolescents are receptive to the influences present in the world in which they inhabit. This receptiveness to outside influence presents public health professionals with the opportunity to develop and implement initiatives that are designed to equip adolescents with healthy behaviors that they can carry into adulthood.

Prevention practitioners have long recognized the importance of promoting emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development in youth in order to facilitate their successful transition into adulthood rather than just focusing on avoiding problem behaviors.<sup>4</sup> The underlying assumption of PYD is that a core set of conditions are associated with most of the observable problems seen in youth and that an organized response to the conditions is more effective than responding to their outcomes. In contrast to a problem-based approach, PYD encourages 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.<sup>5</sup> Efforts designed to help build these characteristics in youth and focusing 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.<sup>6</sup> Because LHDs are often engaged in providing direct services, and other related health promotion activities for youth, policies, funding streams, and programmatic initiatives that strive to integrate concepts of PYD into practice will assist LHDs in their efforts to improve the health and well-being of adolescents at the local level.

Public health professionals who support PYD recognize that these approaches should not replace public health prevention efforts but should be used to complement existing prevention efforts.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, research on adolescent health and youth programming suggest that effective youth development programs include components that encourage positive youth-adult relationships and also involve youth in aspects of program design and planning.<sup>8</sup> Lasting programs that engage youth, promote strong social connection, particularly to parents, have been shown to be promising in terms of bringing about positive outcomes for youth. LHDs that are able to include PYD concepts, such as the participation of youth, in program and service planning and implementation, have a greater chance of promoting strong social connections, building self-confidence, and enhancing internal assets among youth in their respective communities.

### **Record of Action**

*Approved by NACCHO Board of Directors  
July 2009*

<sup>1</sup> Dahl, RE, Spear, LP (Eds.) *Adolescent Brain Development: Vulnerabilities and Opportunities*. New York Academy of Sciences, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Kirby, D et al. *Emerging Answers: 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy., November 2007.

<sup>3</sup> National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (1999). "Risks and Opportunities: Synthesis of Studies on Adolescence." Forum on Adolescence. Michelle D.Kipke, Ed. Board on Children Youth and Families. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>6</sup> Scales, PC & Leffert N. *Developmental assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*. Minneapolis: Search Institute. 1999

<sup>7</sup> Small, S, Memmo M. Contemporary Models of Youth Development and Problem Prevention: Toward an Integration of Terms, Concepts, and Models. *Fam Relations*. 2004; 53:3-11.

<sup>8</sup> 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.