

YOUTH AT RISK IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

INTRODUCTION

At the LWVMC Program Planning meeting of 2013, a group of members from the Education, Network for Children, Health and Gangs committees joined to propose a two-year study of Youth at Risk in Montgomery County. We defined “youth” as age 12 to 21 (i.e., youth in middle school up to adulthood). We elected to concentrate on six general topics for the two-year study, adding two more issues later.

- Middle/high school failure, absenteeism, suspension, quitting school and physical or mental challenges requiring special education;
- Youth in foster care and those, on their own, after aging out of foster care;
- Youth with emotional mental health needs;
- Bullying;
- Youth in gangs;
- Homelessness;
- Abuse and neglect;
- Human trafficking.

With the number of topic areas related to youth at risk, committee members decided to split the task and present some of the issues this Fall and the remainder in late Spring of 2015. There should be enough information in each so that LWVMC members can discuss, dig into, debate, and offer insights and ideas for understanding and working with these critical societal/youth problems and issues.

When a youth presents behavior that gains the attention of the school, community, or county social service or juvenile justice system, and is identified as in need of additional services, he/she may be considered a youth at risk. Young people involved in a variety of situations may have parents who care about them and are involved in their lives, but their problems often present more challenges than parents can handle on their own.

Montgomery County Government has expressed its commitment to improve the outcomes of youth at risk through a variety of approaches and programs. This Fact Sheet will describe the following:

- Montgomery County Public Schools: How are schools identifying youth that may be at risk, and what resources are available for them?
- Gangs: County Programs on Gang Activity
- Positive Youth Development Initiative: A look at a new approach for at-risk youth and the collaborative county and community programs to help them thrive.
- Human Trafficking
- County Council Oversight

MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Montgomery County Public Schools are on the frontline for identifying and diagnosing youth at risk as one third of their waking hours during the school week are spent in class. Schools have personnel trained to recognize problems and have the authority to act on them. Often, parents note changes in their children’s behavior without being able to pinpoint specifics or knowing how to help. Observations of teachers and school authorities represent the first step.

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Certain behaviors that present at school alert teachers to possible problems. Absenteeism is the most noticeable. Chronic absenteeism (10% of the school year) for any reason, including excused, unexcused and suspension absences, can predict that children won't read proficiently by the end of grade three and, among older students, will drop out of school before graduation. This is especially challenging for low-income students who lose more ground than others and lack the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom. Visual evidence of bruises and broken bones suggest that the student may be suffering from child abuse, bullying or getting into fights. Observations of neglect such as soiled and inappropriate clothing and signs of poor health and malnutrition are also significant signs in diagnosing youth at risk. Documented evidence of dropping grades and test scores, neglect of homework and projects due, and withdrawing from class participation are further warning signals.

After the principal is alerted, the appropriate counselor, social worker, psychologist and police are informed. Often, a telephone call or a note or request for a parent-teacher meeting begins the process of changing course for the student. A second step consists of an Educational Management Team review which gathers all of the staff that has contact with the student who is regarded as at risk. They discuss the problems and needs and come up with a plan of action. Subsequent meetings are scheduled to measure progress. Parents are also invited to participate at the appropriate time.

Using the Survey of School Environment to collect data to share with parents, MCPS makes efforts to facilitate a strong home-school partnership and comprehensive involvement that reflects the diversity of local school communities. Directives from the central office ensure that staff is properly trained and understands the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships and receives strategies to implement them. Among the standards are the need to provide a positive environment so parents feel welcome and respected, to be prepared to communicate in languages other than English and to have multiple methods of receiving feedback from parents and providing informative materials in a variety of formats.

The following are offices within MCPS that address the problems of youth at risk.

Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships focuses on at-risk and disadvantaged children ensuring that immigrant children and families receive services. Among other functions, they coordinate Linkages to Learning and Excel Beyond the Bell (described below).

Division of ESOL/Bilingual Programs provides instruction, assessments, counseling and parent outreach that help English language learners to demonstrate successful academic performance across all curriculum areas.

Division of Special Education deals with school-based problems and has many programs including secondary intensive reading implementing strategies for improving reading and writing based on individual student needs, extended school year which provides continuing support during the summer for selected students, special services for students with learning and academic disabilities who require special services primarily as a result of a learning disability. Secondary Learning Centers meet the needs of academically challenged learning disabled secondary students. They receive special education for several class periods and are integrated into general education programs whenever possible.

The Extension Program serves students of middle or high school age who have moderate, severe or profound intellectual disabilities and/or autism disorders. It also helps students with prolonged histories of aggressive, self-injurious, destructive or disruptive behaviors that have not responded to intervention in a

less restrictive setting. Through a comprehensive behavioral approach, students acquire appropriate social and communicative skills.

The Bridge Program provides an intensive program for adolescents and young adults with behavioral disabilities. The focus is on academic skill development and on altering behaviors that interfere with learning. Learning for Independence students have mild or moderate intellectual and/or multiple disabilities. They learn functional life skills and basic academics in the context of the general school environment and in community settings.

Division of School Counseling, Residency and International Admissions is aware of concerns regarding human trafficking and takes steps to identify such issues when international students enroll. No mention is made of domestic students. Both students and school personnel may call to report suspicious cases to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center in Maryland. In fact, 34% of calls come from minors.

On the Maryland State Youth Risk Behavior Survey given every two years, the results from 2005 to 2011 indicate an increasing percentage of students who feel comfortable talking to teachers or another adult in school. Some of the topics addressed in the survey include being threatened or injured with a weapon, being bullied and engaging in a physical fight at school.

Linkages to Learning, while primarily serving elementary school students and their families, also includes middle school students. It is a school-based program serving thousands of families and, among other things, provides greater access to and referrals for at-risk students who might otherwise not receive or seek such services. Some middle schools included are Forest Oak, Gaithersburg, Eastern, Loiederman, Parkland and Silver Spring International.

Out of School Time (OOOS) Excel Beyond the Bell delivers after school services as well as some evening and weekend programs. They help students with homework, provide a safe place for children when parents are at work, as well as recreational and enrichment activities. These are in addition to traditional extra-curricular activities offered by the schools. Until recently, programs were restricted to students meeting certain academic standards, but current thinking suggests that such criteria rule out at-risk students who may be most in need of such activities. A student's school is a natural place to support such programs since the student is already there. However, there are continuing problems with transportation home since there are a limited number of activity buses after hours.

The Positive Youth Development programs in place since 2006 continue to support school personnel training related to gang behavior and prevention, foster collaboration of school personnel with police street officers and coordinate guidance and help to families. MCPS policies that require collaboration with the police, HHS, the courts and other community groups, such as Identity Inc., foster and support positive interventions that enable students to graduate from high school and move more confidently beyond.

GANGS: COUNTY PROGRAMS ON GANG ACTIVITY

In September of 2004, the Joint County Gang Prevention Task Force of Prince Georges and Montgomery Counties issued its final report and endorsed the following principles:

- By addressing the risk factors for gang involvement, a community can also address other issues faced by youth, young adults and their families such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, truancy and drop-out rates, unemployment, bullying and mental health problems.

- All programs that address prevention, intervention or suppression, whether existing or new to the community, must be culturally sensitive and must reflect the diversity of the community in which they operate.
- All new programs that address prevention, intervention or suppression must be evidence-based with measurable outcomes and must have evaluation programs built in to monitor effectiveness.

In 2009 the LWVMC Committee on the Study of Gang Activity in Montgomery County studied the programs related to prevention, intervention and suppression in countering gang activity in Montgomery County. The study found that there was considerable positive coordination and collaboration between the various agencies such as Police, Courts, MCPS, and HHS. It was also noted that a program had been initiated by the County Executive entitled Positive Youth Development which had a three-pronged set of objectives and included recreation department prevention programs, HHS intervention programs-working primarily with street outreach networks using ex-gang members and social workers and a Gang Task Force.

At the time of the study (2009), the Gang Task Force's evaluation identified the following needs:

- a more targeted and expansive outreach program in Montgomery County
- more state and federal grants to provide greater analysis of data as well as providing more intervention and prevention officers and community worker personnel
- Involvement of the community is essential for successful prevention and intervention
- An upcounty Youth Opportunity Center was needed
- More Youth Outreach workers were needed (in 2009, only three)
- More youth services for job preparation were needed in Conservation Corps, and substance abuse treatment.

Now in 2014, the Positive Youth Development initiative is the county program that has adopted the principles of the factors involved in gang behavior addressed in the original report by the Joint County Gang Task Force in 2004.

The Positive Youth Development/Gang Intervention and Suppression Initiative is a comprehensive response to the children and youth who have been exposed to trauma, gangs and youth violence in the county and reflects the commitment by the county to an approach that includes prevention, intervention and suppression components. The Initiative's priorities serve to enhance existing approaches and ensure that the county is able to respond to emerging threats and challenges using culturally-competent approaches.

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

As noted in the County Executive's proposed Operating Budget for 2015, the concept for the Positive Youth Development Initiative in Montgomery County began with a new vision articulated by County Executive, Ike Leggett, for focusing on the issues of gang activity and youth violence that were more prominent in specific locations in the county. This vision called for new efforts to encompass a broader cross-discipline approach for positive youth development rather than to strictly focus on gang prevention.

The Positive Youth Development Initiative (PYDI) that developed from that vision became a comprehensive response to the problems of children and youth who have been exposed to trauma, gangs and violence and it reflects commitment by the county to an approach that includes prevention, intervention and suppression components. It has also evolved to include many other conditions that put children at risk of loss of confidence and failure.

Seven county departments form the leadership for the PYDI:

- Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
- Department of Recreation (MCDR)
- Department of Public Libraries
- Department of Police (MCP)
- Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)
- Office of the State's Attorney
- Department of Economic Development

These, along with community organizations such as the Collaboration Council for Children and Youth, the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County and Montgomery College provide a network of collaborative services to youth at risk. Beyond reducing gang violence and crime, these services and programs are designed to help youth explore possibilities and pursue a positive path.

The FY15 recommended budget includes \$16.4 million in tax-supported resources for PYDI, including funds for community organizations that augment county services to youth and their families. This total includes an increase of \$1.4 million above last year's budget which will add needed staff and enhance a number of existing services.

Many of the services are provided by two or more organizations, many in collaboration with MCPS. For example, the Excel Beyond the Bell after school programs involve MCDR, MCPS, and the Collaboration Council to provide programs at five locations and include programming in science, technology, engineering and math: sports; a variety of dance and arts programming; a hot supper and delayed after school bus transport.

DHHS and MCPS collaborate on Wellness Centers which provide school-based positive youth development, prevention and intervention programs for after school activities, job readiness, academic support, trauma-informed mental health, parent support groups, truancy reduction, substance abuse and other health-related services.

A Street Outreach Network, under DHHS, provides gang and youth violence crisis intervention, conflict management, and recreational and other life-affirming activities. The network provides support services for youth and young adults returning to the community from incarceration or suspension and two members have been trained in a new trauma-informed curriculum that focuses on young girls exposed to trauma.

Aside from the many sports programs, the MCDR provides after school hours, they also offer summertime teen programs. They work with Identity, an organization serving Latino at-risk youth, the Center for Adoption Support and Education, MCPS and others to provide summer programs for teens and special programming for children in adoptive or foster care. MCDR operates a Student/Teen Employment program that provides training during the summer in general landscaping maintenance skills as well as job readiness training in financial literacy, job etiquette, teamwork and communication for at-risk youth in school aged 16 to 19.

The MCP has a significant role in responding to and combating gang activity through the Centralized Gang Task Force whose role includes surveillance, intelligence gathering, investigation and street enforcement. Another important role is educating the public and other governmental agencies on gang activity.

The MCP provides School Resource Officers (SROs), one from each of the six police districts to ensure safety in schools by deterring and preventing acts of violence and gang activity while fostering positive relationships between youth and police. Each district also has a Community Services Officer who provides community outreach.

The MCP offers a number of positive development activities for youth including the 1st District Police Adventure Camp which includes sports, arts and crafts, and educational presentations. Its goal is to gain the trust of youth and encourage them to make positive decisions. The 6th District Montgomery Village Promise Academy provides life skills and leadership development opportunities and empowers participants to achieve their personal goals. The program reaches out to Montgomery Village middle school youth for a one-week camp. Students receive instruction in leadership, community involvement, conflict resolution, financial literacy, and identifying career choices.

Under the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Detention Services provides a GED and High School Diploma Program, manages the Gang Management Program which mostly involves young offenders, and provides a dedicated youthful offender housing unit focusing on life skills, positive youth development and education.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The inclusion of human trafficking in this fact sheet was inspired by the Montgomery County Forum on Human Trafficking, organized by the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., Theta Omega Omega Chapter, that two of our committee members attended in September of 2013. What they learned about tactics used to recruit youth for prostitution in Montgomery County astonished and outraged them, especially learning that Montgomery County is a hub of activity, invisible to most of us, but very profitable to the trafficking network, well-heeled county customers and devastating to the victims.

They proceeded to invite some of the expert speakers to present to the League's Brown Bag meeting which was held in January of this year. This meeting became our first attempt to spread the word about human trafficking in the county. Because trafficking for sex or labor continues invisibly, and is possibly growing, we regard it important to continue alerting the public of its existence and protecting our youth.

Human trafficking is a 21st century form of slavery that is found in all 50 of the United States and permeates almost every country of the world. It is a low-risk, high profit industry that exploits men, women and children for labor and commercial sex. International law criminalizes human trafficking under the United Nations Palermo Protocol. It is a recognized criminal act in the United States according to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, the first law on human trafficking in the United States, and its subsequent reauthorizations.

TVPA recognizes U. S. human trafficking victims as:

- Persons under age 18 induced into commercial sexual activity, regardless of consent
- Adults 18 years of age or over who are forced, deceived or coerced to perform commercial sex acts;
- Minors and adults who are compelled to work or provide services through force, fraud or coercion.

TVPA legally defines "severe forms of human trafficking" as follows:

- Sex Trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, providing transport to or obtaining a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act. It is accomplished through force, fraud, and coercion. All

commercial sex acts induced against minors are considered sex trafficking regardless of the presence of force, fraud or coercion.

- Labor Trafficking includes the recruitment, harboring, transportation provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of labor or services. It is induced through force, fraud and coercion and manifests through involuntary servitude, peonage and debt bondage or slavery. Labor trafficking commonly occurs in agriculture, restaurants, magazine sales crews, and other informal industries or services.

The number of trafficking victims within the United States and worldwide is largely unknown. The U.S. State Department estimates that about 21 million people are enslaved, worldwide and that less than 2% of those victims have been identified.

The Polaris Project, which was founded in 2002 and is a leading national organization in the fight against local and global human trafficking, aims to help states pass anti-trafficking bills and publicize facts about all forms of human trafficking in order to make citizens aware of the consequences and impact of human trafficking on local communities.

In 2007 the Maryland State Legislature established a Human Trafficking Task Force. The Maryland Task Force brings together local, State and federal law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, prosecutors, state and federal agencies, victims advocacy groups and others to foster cooperation, evaluate laws, and recommend policy and legislation.

Maryland law defines human trafficking for sexual purposes in Criminal Law Article 11-303 which makes it unlawful for a person to knowingly take, place or harbor another for prostitution; persuade, induce or encourage another to be placed in any location for prostitution; use or detain another by force, threat or persuasion to engage in prostitution; or receive compensation for procuring or placing another in a place or house of prostitution.

We've learned from Police investigations that some county massage parlors, acupuncture and reflexology salons, or other such businesses are fronts for prostitution. Thirteen establishments have been shut down. Maryland delegate, Jennie Forehand, reported that legitimate massage parlors are losing customers due to the association with the "front" ones.

Those that traffic youth under 18 years of age, if caught, face the highest penalty. The perpetrators are now avoiding the younger ones and are recruiting those aged 18 to 21. Some legislators are supporting changing the law to protect youth to age 21.

Labor trafficking is also occurring among us in our communities. Victims are nannies or housekeepers, restaurant workers, or garden/lawn tenders. Look for signs of abuse and exploitation. Sometimes intervention is possible through use of hotlines or tips to report suspicions. Many of these victims are foreign newcomers who may not speak English and have little knowledge of their human rights nor how to escape from an abusive or exploitative situation. The National Human Trafficking Resource Center is a Polaris Project funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services. It provides a national 24-hour toll-free, confidential hotline with access to speakers and/or interpreters of many languages to receive and respond to calls for help or provide referrals.

In June of 2014, Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett announced the appointment of a Montgomery County Human Trafficking Task Force. The press release stated that this new task force will

“explore possible new county legislation to combat human trafficking, raise awareness of the forms human trafficking takes in the County and review ways to improve services provided by the county to victims of human trafficking”. The press release also stated that although there was a Maryland State Human Trafficking Task Force established in 2007, “the nature of associated crimes may differ from one jurisdiction to another and we need to focus resources and attention on our own law enforcement and service providers.” Furthermore, this press release emphasizes that law enforcement and service providers believe that the county public is largely unaware that human trafficking (sexual prostitution and forced labor) and its tragic consequences exist right here in Montgomery County. As we discuss the issue of Human Trafficking, let us keep in mind that the victims, both male and female, are typically young Americans, and often homeless, runaways, or youth from the foster care system, many having come from abused or neglected childhoods, survivors of bullying situations, sexual abuse or gang association. These youth are at risk.

Chair of the Montgomery County Human Trafficking Task Force Bobbe Mintz stated that “one of the first goals of this task force is to shine a light on this serious problem.”

COUNTY COUNCIL OVERSIGHT

The Montgomery County Council has had a complementary interest in, and support of, the Positive Youth Development approach for youth at risk. In April of 2014 they gathered together a panel of critical stakeholders of county and private nonprofit community organizations for a discussion on Increasing Youth Attachment to School and Community to Prevent Juvenile Crime and Detention.

They discussed the status of the MCPS regulations on suspensions and expulsions which had to be revised consistent with new state regulations intended to reduce the use of suspensions as disciplinary actions and to reduce or eliminate the disparity in their use.

The council was also briefed on other supportive services for youth including, a new initiative designed to promote social cohesion among diverse county residents, promote public safety and reduce violence. The County Executive’s Faith Community Working Group introduced the model for the Crossroad program that provides culturally competent interventions to assist youth and families and deter at-risk youth from the path of violence.

Later this year the council’s Health and Human Services Committee will be reviewing the results of the 2013 Youth Behavioral Risk Survey (YBRS) that is given to a representative sample of middle and high school students every two years. This survey covers questions on safety, violence, bullying, suicide, use of controlled substances, sexual behavior, body weight, as well as nutrition and physical activity. In the past the results were only available for the state as a whole, this time the data has been disaggregated so that we can have data specific to county youth. It will be useful to have this direct self-reported behavior link.

This Fact Sheet was prepared by the Youth at Risk Committee: Jean Clarren*, Debbie Ehrenstein, Eva Feder, Carol Gross, Yvonne Hudson, Maxine Lewack, and Connie Tonat.

* Jean Clarren, who died on October 8, 2014, was a dedicated member of the Youth at Risk Committee and a vital active member of the Network for Children. Jean contributed most of the material contained in the section on human trafficking. Her concerns about the risks and social issues young people face in today’s society are represented in her words in this Fact Sheet. It is with sad hearts that we dedicate this and our next Fact Sheet to her memory.