

# BUILDING POSITIVE POLICE - YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS VIA AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS AT THE SCHOOL SITE

Clinton D. Longacre, Ed.D.

## ABSTRACT

The subject to be considered in this paper is just one piece of a very important puzzle concerning vulnerable adolescents. The focus here is on methods of reaching young people who are on the bubble of delinquency. Without intervention these at-risk adolescents could very well become part of the alarming statistics associated with delinquency. The process to be presented is a process for establishing a collaborative effort of the local police department and the after school programs that take place at the school site (ASPASS) sponsors. One perspective will focus on a formal agreement between the police department and the ASPASS sponsors. The other perspective will focus on what police officers can do on a more informal basis with the vulnerable adolescents. A very important aspect of this cooperative effort is the fact that the needed resources are in place through established police programs and the ASPASS sponsor.

## INTRODUCTION

The nature of after school programs taking place at the school site (ASPASS) is one of collaboration between the schools and a variety of community partners for the common good of young people. The police officers in the United States have a very tough job and deserve credit for a job well done. The process proposed in this paper is not intended to add additional burdens to them, but is intended to demonstrate how they could be a tremendous help to at-risk young people. Police officers have a first hand look at the needs of young people and a first hand opportunity to be a positive force in their lives. Police officers are in a unique position to both promote and/or be involved in the programming aspect of their community's ASPASS program. A partnership could leverage both police and ASPASS sponsor resources to address critical youth issues in local communities. The process would be made up of a series of interpersonal relationships between the police officers, ASPASS sponsors, and the vulnerable youth in the community. The phases of relationships and the dynamics of relationships are explored to provide police and ASPASS sponsors with a distinct perception of how to develop a healthy alliance to help save the targeted adolescents. The process would require the development of strong advisory councils which would involve the police, ASPASS sponsors, and youth members who are represented on the council. A very pragmatic aspect of this process is the fact that the needed resources are in place through established community programs and the ASPASS sponsor. Even the time commitment of the police officers could be as little as communicating with the targeted young people.

## THE CHALLENGE

Mr. William J. Bratton, the police commissioner of New York City, shared that his memories as a child were of police officers helping him to cross the street on his way to

school, and that they were strong role models. Therefore, it was natural for him to emulate the police officers, rather than being alienated from them. He feels that many young people see police officers only as authority figures to be defied, rather than assisting people; and that the young people's peers reinforce the alienation. Mr. Bratton proposed the idea of exposing kids to positive interactions with police officers by reaching into the schools with positive programs of character building, citizenship training, and physical fitness. He also wanted to surround them with like-minded students with similar goals, exerting a very different and more beneficial kind of peer pressure. He stated that peer pressure leads many young people astray and in some neighborhoods just hanging out on the street corner can be a career path straight to crime. He wanted the young people to be hanging out with the police officers. He expressed the idea that if we capture their hearts early, it can make all the difference in the world (Bratton, 1996).

Today, while after-school programs can provide positive settings for young people, special attention should be given to the at-risk young people targeted as most in need of the program. It is unfortunate that the young people who would greatly benefit from a structured program, are also the ones who most often do not get involved in the process. In response to a record of intermittent progress concerning involvement of our young people, we are challenged to bring new merit to community engagement by connecting its rich resources to our most pressing youth problems (Bingle, Games, Ludlum, & Osborne, 2000). This call for civic engagement has awakened renewed interest in promoting citizenship, building new alliance initiatives and promoting a broad sense of civic responsibility (Boyte & Hollander, 1999).

In the late 1980's and early 1990's it was recognized that problems created by young people using drugs, becoming gang members, becoming school dropout's, and generally involved in anti-social behavior was a growing concern. Resources obtainable through federal programs facilitated this emphasis on a more methodical and comprehensive engagement of youth at-risk problems in local communities. These resources have provided funds and technical assistance to create programs to face the problems of vulnerable young people in our communities. It is proposed here to establish a limited, but strong relationship between the police, ASPASS sponsors, and the young people identified as being on the bubble of delinquency. Police developing relationships with the identified young people is at the heart of this process. Alliance among a variety of interested groups is a clear example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. It requires a special collaboration among all parties solidified by strong, trusting relationships. However, building those relationships is one of the most challenging aspects of any alliance (Torres, 2000).

#### HOW POLICE OFFICERS CAN REACH THE VULNERABLE YOUTH

Police officers are uniquely positioned in our communities to be of tremendous value in helping the vulnerable youth who are on the streets today. Police officers are familiar with the community's trouble spots, the young people who are getting into trouble, and the problems that plague young people everyday. They can be part of an outreach of

youth development programs that go beyond the youth who routinely go to ASPASS facilities and programs and to those who do not feel comfortable in institutional settings. They can be a personal contact to the young people who are systematically excluded from, unaware of, or unreceptive to ASPASS services or those of related agencies. Often the officers live in the areas where they work, which gives them credibility with, and a better understanding of, the at-risk-youth in their communities.

The success of getting the young people involved in programs is heavily dependent on the relationship between the young people and the police officers. The officers would be required to reach out and take steps to alleviate any fear, suspicion, or hostility that might exist. All of these principles stress the importance of a personal relationship between the police officers and the young people. The idea is for police officers to make contact with the vulnerable youth who are not currently involved with ASPASS programs and attempt to draw them into wholesome activities; otherwise the targeted young people may be on the streets and tempted to be involved in high-risk activities. The police can be a good source of information in letting them know about the services and programs that are available to them.

The first step in this process for the police officer is to make the decision to communicate with the at-risk young people. The next step can be a very simple process of smiling at the young people and saying hello. Another idea is to ask their name with a smile and before they are in trouble; ask for their opinions and then listen to the responses without contradicting them; notice when they do something right and express appreciation for what they have done; and perhaps become a mentor to a young person. The police officer can certainly be a good role model and demonstrate integrity and honesty. Such activities will create mutual networking between the targeted youth and the police officer. Through this process the officer can build relationships with the youth and guide them into worth while programs such as ASPASS programs.

#### IMPORTANCE OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC MAKE-UP OF THE COMMUNITY

To be successful, the police officers must be sensitive to an understanding of the community's changing demographics and circumstances; and be savvy and street smart. Many communities in the United States have experienced extraordinarily rapid shifts in population profiles which inevitably create tensions and challenges within the communities. If a particular language is spoken in the community or neighborhood and the officers speak the language then they have an expanded opportunity to reach the at-risk-youth and get them involved in meaningful ASPASS programs.

#### FORMING A POLICE, ASPASS SPONSOR, and YOUTH ALLIANCE

All alliances have a starting a starting point. Each member of a potential relationship attempts to decide what type of relationship they would like to pursue and to convey their interest to the others in the alliance. Alliance initiation requires a method of effectively evaluating and communicating information about the potential rewards and costs that might be expected and having the capacity to fulfill each other's expectations. In order to

have a clear sense of identity and purpose, procedures, and resources need to exist and be effectively communicated (Walshok, 1999).

Police and youth alliances must take place at the personal level where relationships develop between individuals. If the police are to pursue this type of relationship they must have a clear sense of identity and purpose. A clear identification and understanding of the population to be served, must also be established. It is necessary to understand their wants, needs, and concerns. Then the human, physical, and financial resources must be identified. The resources can come from inside or outside the alliance to meet the wants, needs, and concerns. A clear mission, goals, and objectives can provide a basis for establishing solid expectations among potential partners. The representatives of all groups involved should understand the values, goals, and objectives that shape the evaluation of potential alliances. When there is a significant relationship incompatibility, it may be best not to begin an alliance (Duck, 1994).

Police and ASPASS personnel must be sensitive to the concerns of at-risk young people, provide an open and honest account of resources that can be contributed to building a partnership, remain open to diverse opinions, and have the capacity to respond in a timely manner to the young peoples concerns (Freeman, 2000). Personnel from both the police department and the ASPASS sponsor must be skilled in understanding pre-teens and teens, and acting as liaisons among diverse constituencies (Walshok, 1999). These professionals can provide a better understanding of at-risk young people and their needs. When conflicts need to be resolved, these individuals can act as mediators to facilitate communication and problem solving (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF A YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

The development of a youth advisory council at the ASPASS location is critical. The council needs to be made up of the at-risk-young people, parents, one ASPASS representative, and at least one police officer. It is critical that the young people on the advisory council be from the targeted at-risk-group and not the honor students or the most popular students in school for this aspect of the ASPASS program. Young people want a strong voice and involvement in decisions, thus, they should be encouraged to attend and voice their opinions. They know what they want and it is imperative that we listen to them. Young people want ownership in their programs and desire a place where they feel welcome and safe. The location and program must be physically, psychologically, and socially safe for the young people or they will not participate. Through the advisory council they can be the driving force to make these programs successful. The bottom line is that it must be their program.

#### THE EVOLUTION AND MAINTENANCE PROCESS

The development of an alliance is not an exact science. Some relationships develop quickly, while others grow in spurts over time. The interactions and outcomes between the parties influence perceptions of equity, satisfaction, and commitment. Because the outcomes of the relationship will be different for each party the standards against which

they are appraised will be unique to each party; both parties must also examine what is invested and decide if it is a fair exchange. When outcomes are perceived as proportionate to input, even when the outcomes are unequal, a relationship can be satisfying. Thus, alliances do not have to be equal in all aspects in order to be acceptable; however they should be equitable and fair (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

Dependency, which is associated with relationship investments and satisfaction, leads to high levels of commitment to the relationship and less likelihood of terminating the relationship. When dependency is mutual, it leads to healthy interdependency. Acknowledging that any alliance may have differences in relative dependency and power is important to managing and nurturing the development of a healthy relationship. The following steps are necessary for the successful evolution and maintenance of the relationship. The police, ASPASS sponsor, and the youth council members need to develop and use effective means of gaining regular feedback from each other about their perceptions of the alliance and then communicate about the feedback received. The police, ASPASS sponsor, and youth partnership can benefit from incorporating multiple perspectives through the advisory groups. An alliance that maintains frequent interaction on a diverse set of activities needs to be developed by the partners. The police, ASPASS sponsor, and the youth council members need to identify effective means for affirming the value of the alliance and celebrate the mutual and individual benefits, successes, and outcomes of the alliance.

Youth development is multi-faceted. Therefore, it requires a multi-dimensional network to be successful. Schools are usually distributed evenly throughout a community, so they provide a high level of convenience for the young people in the ASPASS programs. Thus, programs the local police department may want to start or become a part of would be quite convenient for the young people they wish to serve, as well. Generally the intent of ASPASS programs is to partner with other organizations in order to leverage the limited available resources in a community.

The limited partnerships are mutually significant when they meet the stated goals. A pattern of success with short term partnerships can provide the foundation for more extensive collaboration in the future. Regularly monitoring of alliances is desirable because it may disclose that an alliance which had initially satisfying qualities, but is no longer meeting expectations, should be discontinued (Gelmon, 2000). Police and the ASPASS sponsor should plan for managing alliance termination in a sensitive manner that allows for and encourages the development of more appropriate alliances in the future. Qualities that maintain effective communication and positive relationships, and deal appropriately with counterproductive behaviors should be promoted (Morton, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

The analysis in this paper has focused on the initiation, maintenance, and dissipation of the alliance. The police department, ASPASS sponsor, and youth council alliance is a series of interpersonal relationships built one on the other to create a bond between the partners. There are many ways in which the police, ASPASS personnel, and youth can

become involved. There are complex programs involving numerous organizations that are trying to reach at-risk youth. However, it is contended here that the most meaningful way to build partnerships is by keeping the process simple. Involving only a few key players and allowing time for the cohesion to take place may provide a process which leads to additional forms of civic involvement. This may in turn serve to address meaningful service activities concerning youth-at-risk issues. This may require ongoing dialogue among all alliance members to ensure successful implementation. The best relationships are those that are self-affirming and supportive. Unfortunately, the motives to protect one's own turf often dilutes relationships and leads to incompatibility.

Successful alliances must find ways to preserve the integrity of each partner and, at the same time, honor the purpose of the relationship and growth of each party. The transformation from each party assessing individual outcomes to interdependency that results in an appraisal of joint outcomes is an important sign of growth and maturity that can be used to evaluate the alliance. The alliance will be most meaningful and enduring when individuals conclude that each is contributing in a meaningful and effective manner to activities that have a positive impact on important and positive youth-at-risk outcomes.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clinton D. Longacre, Ed.D.  
Director, Recreation Studies  
Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation  
Emporia State University  
Emporia, KS 66801

Clinton D. Longacre holds a doctorate degree from The University of Oklahoma in Adult/Community Education. His interests include university/school/community collaborations; youth-at-risk programs; and student development programs.