

Running Head: SHAKER HEIGHTS YOUTH

Policy Advocacy Project: Shaker Heights Youth  
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SPPP 529: Child and Family Policy & Service Delivery  
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April 23, 2007

## **Overview**

### ***Problem, Evidence, & Strategy***

Our group chose to address the problem of the lack of affordable recreation opportunities for economically disadvantaged youth in Shaker Heights. To begin, the problem can be best understood if each facet of the statement is explicitly defined. In this problem statement, the word “enough” refers to the capacity to meet the needs of the youth in the community so that all children have equitable access to recreation and leisure activities that will help them conquer developmental milestones in a successful and meaningful manner. Next, “indoor recreation opportunities” could include, but are not limited to, an indoor art center, gymnasium, game room, library, computer cafe with internet access and space to hold special interest classes such as martial arts or music instruction. The phrasing, “economically disadvantaged youth”, denotes children from households that are not able to afford the out-of-pocket expenses associated with fee-for-service youth activities. Finally, “youth” refers to all children who are residents of Shaker Heights; however our focus is specifically on older youth (teenagers) because this is the population for which there is currently the least amount of free or subsidized recreation and leisure alternatives.

The Shaker Heights community has also recognized the growing need for more alternative recreation for youth. This is demonstrated in the city’s Recreation and Leisure Framework Plan (through the Community Life Department), which sets out to, among many other plans, create a skate park and two outdoor basketball courts at Thornton Park. However, it is unclear whether the teens in most need of

access to these facilities are geographically situated to utilize them. The data show that most of Shaker's low-income families are situated in south Shaker, about two miles away from Thornton Park (US Census website; NEOCANDO, accessed 15 Mar, 2007).

Moreover, these facilities are only seasonably available to youth. The RLFP does not outline any ideas for indoor youth recreation, despite the fact that this was repeatedly mentioned in the community forums as being desirable additions to the community (City of Shaker website, accessed on Mar 14, 2007). During one of the first community meetings, it is listed that residents ranked the development of a multi-purpose community/recreation center toward the top of the wish list. As ideas were scaled down, however, the framework became deficient of any provisions for indoor recreation and leisure. The yielding conclusion is that while it is clearly beneficial to the entire community for youth to have productive, healthy and supervised recreational options that are accessible year-round, Shaker's answer with the RLFP currently does not propose such options.

According to the Shaker Heights High School's State of Ohio Report Card for the 2005-2006 school year, 18% of the school's students are considered economically disadvantaged. This equals a total of 425 high school students who were facing financial challenges in the previous school year. The large number of students represented in that figure indicates a great amount of students who experience limited exposure to stimulating and productive activities during their leisure time.

The benefit of recreational alternatives for teenagers has been shown repeatedly in studies used to inform various after-school programs. These benefits range from enhancing youth's social skills, academic achievement, peer relations, reducing risk factors related to substance abuse, sexual experimentation and criminal activity (Afterschool Alliance, 2005). All of these factors illuminate a current gap (along socioeconomic lines) of access to developmental activities. These activities help contribute to individual's capacities to successfully compete in both the educational and employment arenas. In addition, the lack of access to community-based recreation for youth may influence other challenges pertaining to the greater community such as the looming academic achievement gap, juvenile delinquency and racial segregation among neighborhoods, all of which the Shaker Heights City Council has pledged commitments toward eliminating.

As residents and employees of Shaker, we observe youth partaking in unproductive or un-stimulating activities such as standing around on street corners, outside of public places and at entrances to the library. The data to support this observation are not readily available because these are not criminal offenses and there have not been any other surveys or reports of these activities completed. Even so, without the hard data, talking to other members of the community and one of us living in south Shaker, it is clearly an observable issue.

The strategy we implemented to address this problem was to become better informed about this issue, inspire a community-wide conversation about the topic, and cultivate support for our efforts to increase recreational opportunities for economically disadvantaged youth. To do this, we decided to develop a

comprehensive task sheet to meet the above-stated objectives in the timeframe allowed. We each took on an equitable share of tasks, met the targeted deadlines for completing them and shared our experiences and information with each other on an ongoing basis. We decided, as a group, to attend some meetings individually and others as a group, depending on how much weight we considered the meeting to hold as well as availability. We utilized email to keep each other abreast of individual activities that related to the project and invite feedback from one another.

Overall, our strategy was to enter into this advocacy effort as a blank slate, looking for useful information along the way. We did not propose any alternative plans to the community leaders we met with; however we threw out various ideas to gauge reactions regarding funding and levels of interest. When working through this advocacy effort, we continued to remind ourselves to talk to the youth directly impacted by the issue. Holley had access to some kids in the school system and at the Shaker Heights Youth Center. Hillary worked with Moreland on the Move, who is extremely animated around providing better alternatives for youth and Jessica interviewed a small group of teens that represent our target population. Our explicit strategy has been to collect information from a variety of sources and integrate into comprehensive plan that becomes a viable proposal for change.

### **Report on Project Activities**

#### ***Interventions to Date***

In order to gain more insight on this problem, we met with people involved with different components of the Shaker Heights community. We met with different agencies within the community such as the Shaker Heights Youth Center,

the Shaker Heights Police Department, and the city department of Community Life. Due to the wide-reaching effects / stress that the lack of youth activities places upon the community, we also contacted individuals involved with community organizations. This included librarians, council members, adult and adolescent residents. Jessica met with the Shaker Heights Youth Center, obtained schedules for city meetings, met with adolescents, arranged a group meeting with Councilman Gleisser, and researched NEOCANDO. Holley emailed the youth prevention specialist with the Shaker Heights Health Department, arranged a group meeting with the program director of Community Life, analyzed current tax expenditures, and sent police information request forms. Hillary met with the Shaker Heights Police Department, Community Groups, talked to members of block groups, researched information on garbage and vandalism, and discovered information on similar policies in other communities.

***Outcomes of the Interventions***

Some of the intended outcomes that we achieved were that (1) we created many positive relationships with the people in the Shaker Heights Community, (2) we became informed about this issue and the community where the youth live, and (3) we gained a good working relationship with Brian Gleisser. We also met targeted benchmarks for collecting information. Through this activity, we also enhanced our networking skills, which will be beneficial over time to increase the likelihood of success.

Some of the unintended outcomes from the meetings with these people were discovering what has been done in the past to attempt to solve this problem and

what has been considered for alternatives. Everyone we spoke with seemed to be very accepting and supportive of our project. However, they each had their own unique spin on what would be the most successful course of action. Groups, like Moreland on the Move were very willing to do something to help the youth in the community but they wanted to start programs, such as accelerated math and science groups, tutoring, or teaching languages. In a meeting with Kevin Crowe, program director at Community Life, there have been programs that some youth can take part in but only a limited number of them are eligible, as well as the many of the advertised options are no longer offered. We learned that many great projects have been started in the past but once the funding was depleted, the commitment level from the community disintegrated.

Another issue that we researched was youth interactions at the library, a great asset for those that live in the Shaker Heights community. Being a public building, many adolescents patronize the teen center and socialize. Utilizing the library to study and socialize quietly is one thing, but the current situation where teens are often loud and distracting other patrons is unacceptable. In response to this, the library has to remove the youth from the library. In many cases, they do not leave the library premises, requiring a police escort the youth off the property.

One unintended outcome was the reminder of the importance of creating good relationships between youth and authority figures. When youth do not respect authority figures, it is much more difficult for the community to be supportive of helping or spending tax dollars on them.

***Unfinished Business***

This is an enormous project and during this semester we acquired much of the background information and began the networking process to establish a sound foundation. We hope to in the future obtain funding for a program that will have positive results for the youth in the Shaker Heights community with a safe and enjoyable place to relax and spend their free time.

### **Evaluation of the Advocacy Effort**

#### *Analysis*

Within the context of this course, the goal was to develop and implement an advocacy strategy that would culminate in a productive community-level discussion and commitment towards the provision of a safe place for teenagers after school. Beyond this course, the goal is to actually have our efforts materialize in the opening and sustaining of a teen center for Shaker Height's youth.

Our main goals were to (1) inform community leaders and potential collaborators of our interest as well as raise awareness of the need; (2) begin a community wide conversation; and (3) cultivate support for our project. These three objectives were met. A council member who is on the neighborhood revitalization committee, the library staff, the police department, Shaker Heights Youth Center, various neighborhood groups, and the city's Community Life department are now all aware that the three of us are interested in this issue. They are all cognizant that we are committed to devise and follow through with a plan. We are confident we have raised awareness. As far as gaining support, all parties we met with thought it was a great idea and verbally committed to supporting us.

According to our timetable we created early in the planning stage, the tasks were completed. In the composing of this task list, it was necessary to choose our target contracts. We put forth great efforts to include stakeholders from various backgrounds and different funding sources. We needed to determine possible funding sources for this program and who has connections to the decision makers. We needed to discover the willingness of organizations to collaborate with our plan. We also were aware of the necessity to find out what the youth want. We needed to find out what the community wants. It was interesting and enlightening to hear the perspectives of the police department compared to the neighborhood groups. Recognizing all these entities comprise the entire community, we successfully reached all levels. This goal was accomplished by researching historical data, conducting interviews, and fact finding with public records.

There will be a few barriers to meeting this need within the Shaker Heights' community. The largest one will most likely be acquiring the necessary funding to address this need. We have trepidations of other factors discovered during our analysis, such as the community's capacity to formulate policy changes. We have verbal support for the founding idea that this is a serious and urgent community priority but unsure if that verbal support will materialize once these various decision makers are asked to publicly back our program. The key players seemed to understand the need and the benefits of a program. Most seemed willing to help but none wanted to lead.

The goal to raise community awareness and initiate conversations with the potential stakeholders was realized. We discussed the unavailability of affordable recreation opportunities for economically disadvantaged youth in Shaker Heights.

Our process goals included developing a strategy of identifying people and entities that could help us become more informed of the problems as well as offer solutions. We hoped and succeeded in the beginning stage of forming collaborations with various and diverse community groups. We attended meetings, conducted information interviews with public servants, and exchanged emails with various community leaders.

### *Critique*

The organization in this situation is the city of Shaker Heights. The city is the entity that lacks the desire, funding, and manpower to offer youth alternatives for after-school hours.

Getting the residents and more importantly the city workers to espouse the idea that this is a serious and urgent community priority is something we will continue to work on. What the youth are currently doing after school greatly affects the entire community yet the entire community does not seem to acknowledge this. There is an underlying sense of “us” and “them” amongst Shaker residents. We need to be cognizant of how this project proposal and campaign for support could possibly stigmatize certain neighborhoods.

We successfully informed people in different city departments of our interest and they are now aware of something in the works. We need to continue

through the process and maintain the commitment and energy levels. It is imperative we cultivate enough champions for this cause.

The library, which is most affected by the lack of a publicly run alternative, is attempting to rectify their problem. They are currently undergoing a strategic planning process, which the “trouble with their teens” is one component. The city recognizes the problems, along with the police, but does not have a plan to resolve it. The Community Life department is currently holding onto the belief that the Thornton Park expansion will relieve some of the problems. They currently do not have a plan to help the problems at the library.

The problems and strategy of this whole project revolves around the youth in Shaker who need something to do or someplace to go. We are in the initial stage to provide this for them. We are further along than when we started and to our knowledge, the only community group other than the library that is working on a solution. The teens are the direct beneficiaries of our efforts and the community, with reduced nuisances and police calls, will be the secondary beneficiary.

There are few changes we would make if we repeated this initial stage. We contacted the right people, but perhaps we could have contacted more for information gathering. We have identified potential coalition members but have not yet fully engaged them in any planning process. In order to bring everyone to the table and discuss the next steps, we need to spend more time planning and creating the vision. The first meeting with these collaborators needs to have enough information and alternatives in order for them to be willing to get involved at a high level. We have not pursued a plan or strategy with the Shaker Heights Youth Center

due to that being part of phase 2 (coalition building). This project was successful with promising outcomes and generated a great deal of work left to be done.

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