YouthNet 21

A Community-Based Youth Advocacy Effort

A Manual for Youth Leadership

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Introduction

Today's teens are more aware than ever of the social, economic and environmental problems that adversely affect the way they live. But until recently, adults have failed to realize that young people can help solve some of these problems. In the past, adults believed that young people should be seen but not heard and that community involvement was not their responsibility. However, Stuart Langton, author of a guide for teens on community involvement, feels differently.

"What America needs as we grow toward the 21st century," said Langton, "is a positive understanding of the capacity of young people to be a part of the solutions rather than (continually being viewed as) the source of the problem."

Teens now know they can and should do something about community issues and problems and not wait for adults to take the lead. Instead they work with adults as initiators of action.

You can help address youth issues and problems-in your community in three ways. First, help articulate the needs of youth to key decision makers and thus help shape local youth policy. Second, lead in planning and carrying out local efforts to address issues and problems. Third, serve in a support role to other teens by helping them cope with the world around them.

"There is virtually no limit to what young people - with appropriate education, training and encourage-ment - can do, no social need they cannot meet. We reiterate: Young people are essential resources, and society needs their active participation as citizens."

Excerpt from *The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Families,* W.T. Grant Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship.

What is YouthNet 21?

YouthNet 21 is a community-based youth advocacy effort that teams adults and teens. This group then identifies and addresses issues that effect young people in their community. YouthNet 21 provides a way for young people to give leadership to positive change that will help make their community a better place to grow up in the 21st century. The name YouthNet 21 incorporates the central concepts of this effort.

A local YouthNet 21 effort revolves around a core of young people interested in doing something for their community This group of young people can begin with an existing 4-H club, a student council or simply a group of teens from the same community or school. The group would then look for other people to involve in their efforts and form a local YouthNet 21 group. This group gives leadership to local change efforts.

This manual provides YouthNet 21 members with a step-by-step guide to developing and carrying out projects and programs that address locally identified issues. The manual can be used to train YouthNet 21 members or as an outline for YouthNet 21 meetings or work sessions.

Additional support to YouthNet 21 groups comes from an issue-based training conference for high school sophomores and juniors. The four-day conference focuses on helping delegates better understand the nature and scope of contemporary youth issues. At the conference, delegates may select from a broad range of issues on which to focus their study. Delegates meet in action groups to develop plans for addressing youth issues on the community,county and state level. In past years, these action groups have focused on topics such as teen sexuality, self-esteem, peer pressure, substance abuse, interpersonal communication and stress. Other conference sessions deal with youth advocacy, building self-esteem, building networks and coalitions, and program planning.Each county may send two delegates to the conference which is held each October at the Kentucky Leadership Center near Lake Cumberland.

Objectives of YouthNet 21

The objectives of YouthNet 21 are to:
- *involve youth in the process of addressing contemporary issues that affect the growth and development of young people in their community;*
- *enhance feelings of self-worth in youth;*
- *help youth gain the confidence needed to play a meaningful role in community leadership;*
- *instill in youth a commitment to community involvement;*
- *prepare youth to become advocates for a cause;*
- *provide youth with the skills needed to give leadership to local change efforts;*

• *help youth learn to assume productive roles in their family, workplace and community; and*
• *organize local networks and coalitions that focus on the well being of young people.*

Involving Youth as Resources

As educational institutions and public service agencies take a more issue-oriented approach to youth development, it is imperative that they involve young people in determining what those issues are as well as in planning and carrying out programs that address those issues. All too often, young people are excluded from the decision-making process regarding programs that exist for their well being. YouthNet 21, on the other hand, believes that young people can and should take part in identifying and addressing issues that affect them. Young people have valuable information that they can provide to the program development process.

YouthNet 21 views young people as equal partners with adults in the program development process. The ideas, beliefs, opinions and suggestions of young people are given equal weight to those of adults. In YouthNet 21, adults and teens alike participate in local planning groups to decide what needs to be done on an issue of wide public concern.

A Focus on Prevention

When looking at issues and problems affecting young people, it becomes easy to focus attention on fixing the individuals affected by that issue or problem. Resources often are focused on relieving symptoms rather than on preventing the underlying causes of the behaviors or actions.

"Prevention is an active process of creating conditions and fostering personal attributes that promote the well being of people," according to Bill Lofquist of the Associates for Youth Development. "By far, prevention yields the most cost effective and longest-lasting results of any strategy for dealing with issues or problems."

Let's look at some contemporary issues or problems. What could be some of the underlying causes for young people participating in the following dangerous behaviors? You may want to work through this activity with your YouthNet 21 group.

Behavior or Problem	Possible Root Causes
Dropping out of School	_____
	_____
Using Drugs or Alcohol	_____
	_____
Teenage Pregnancy	_____
	_____
Teenage Suicide	_____
	_____
Teenage Violence	_____
	_____
Apathy	_____
	_____
Eating Disorders	_____
	_____
Other	_____
	_____

What could your group do to prevent some of these problems? Would you focus on changing the

environment in which young people grow and develop or would you focus on helping youth directly through programs dealing with personal growth and development? A mix of these approaches may be best.

The Process of
Planned Change

A problem can be thought of as the discrepancy that exists between the way things are and the way things should be. Some call this a "need." Many times problems. affecting young people are closely related to the same root cause; such as a lack of self-esteem. This complex, interrelated array of problems often is referred to as an issue.

You can address issues and problems through an organized process of planned change. This process focuses on either bringing about changes in the
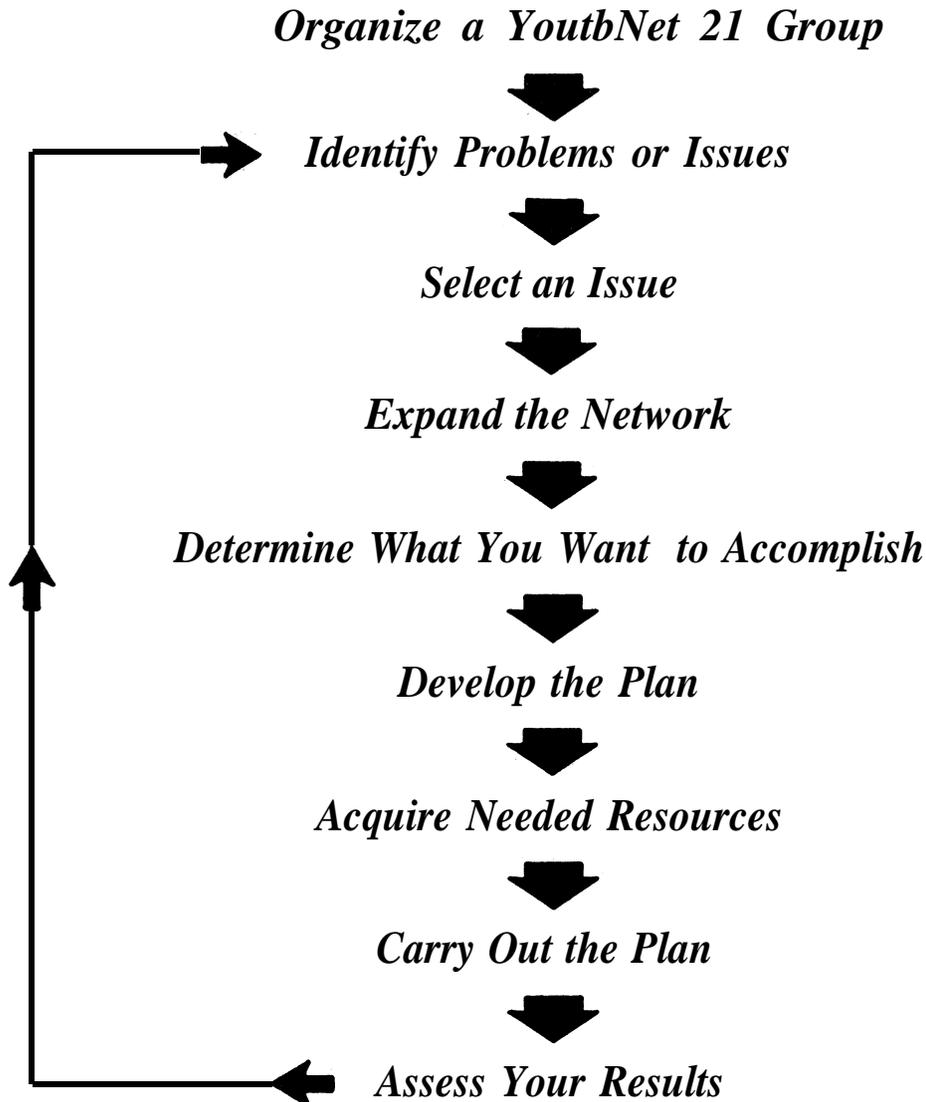
environments and conditions in which young people grow and develop or on personal growth and development. Below is a model that depicts this process. Your YouthNet 21 group will give leadership to this change process in your community.

Each of the steps is discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

Organize a
YouthNet 21 Group

A YouthNet 21 group can begin with as few as two or three people with an interest in doing something for their community. This core group may then ask other people to become involved with their efforts.

Some YouthNet 21 groups arise from existing clubs or organizations. For example a county-wide teen 4-H club may evolve into a YouthNet 21 group. A high

Organize a YoutbNet 21 Group

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Identify Problems or Issues

⬇

Select an Issue

⬇

Expand the Network

⬇

Determine What You Want to Accomplish

⬇

Develop the Plan

⬇

Acquire Needed Resources

⬇

Carry Out the Plan

⬇

Assess Your Results

school student council may wish to use YouthNet 21 as a framework for organizing its work on a particular issue or problem. Almost any organization can become part of the YouthNet 21 system. All it takes is interested people.

A YouthNet 21 group can have anywhere from three to several hundred members. Counties can have as many YouthNet chapters as needed. The group(s) may include individuals who have never been in 4-H. A YouthNet 21 group may organize to work on a single issue or problem and then disband, or stay together to work on a new problem or issue. If it disbands, a new YouthNet 21 group may organize to work on another problem or issue.

The next step is to hold an organizational meeting of those interested in becoming part of your local YouthNet 21 effort. Select a meeting time and place that is suitable for as many potential members as possible. Invite key adults that your group feels would be interested in working with you. Some adults you might consider include your 4-H agent, parents, guidance counselors, teachers or business leaders.

Your group may choose to elect a leadership team to guide work on your chosen project(s). The traditional team comprised of a president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer may be appropriate. However, your group may simply elect an overall chairman and appoint different individuals to lead various committees or tasks. What you choose will be determined by the group and the task to be accomplished.

Identify Problems and Issues

The first and perhaps most important step is to determine the most critical issues, problems and needs of your community. An issue was described earlier as an interrelated set of problems. Issues are matters of wide public interest that indicate a need for action.

Community issues grow out of accumulated daily events - concerns people talk about or worries expressed by friends and neighbors as well as by business people and those in government. There are a number of sources of information that can help you identify local issues and concerns. A few of these are discussed below.

• Community leaders - Talk with community leaders about what they see as major concerns in your community. Since there will be many different perspectives and points of view on a particular issue, be sure you interview leaders who represent a cross section of the people and ideas in your community. Some people good for interviews include educators, representatives from the business community, police, members of the clergy, elected officials, youth

professionals, representatives of social service agencies and officers of local civic groups.

• News Media - Newspapers, magazines, and radio and television programs are excellent sources of information regarding community needs. They reveal what people think and say about issues and problems as well as serve as a source of valuable statistics related to issues in question.

• Libraries - Libraries often have books and other materials that contain information to help determine the scope of a problem in a specific geographic location. Reports from organizations such as the Children's Defense Fund or Census Bureau contain this type of information.

• People - The people who live in a community often are the best source of information about the community. There are many ways to gather information from the public. Among the most popular of these are mailed questionnaires, telephone surveys, face-to-face interviews and newspaper polls. Town meetings, hearings and public forums are used to bring people together to express their views on matters of wide public concern and can be a good source of information for you. They also can identify other agencies and groups with interests and concerns similar to yours. There may already be a county youth coalition that meets regularly to discuss youth issues.

In the space below, list some specific sources of information your group may want to use in assessing your community's needs. You might want to assign certain members of your YouthNet 21 group to gather data from each of these sources.

Source	Who will do it?

5

If you choose an interview approach to assess community needs, use the following as an outline for conducting your interviews.

Interview Guide

Introduce yourself as a member of a YouthNet 21 group sponsored by the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. Tell them that you are interviewing different members of the community regarding the needs of young people and that your group is interested in working on a project or program to address some of those needs. Assure them that their responses are confidential. Be courteous, well groomed, brief and tactful. Here is a possible outline.

Person Interviewed _____

Position _____

1. What would you say were the three biggest problems facing youth in your area?_____

_____

_____

2. Are the biggest problems for the total community the same or different than those for the youth?

_____Same _____Different

If different explain._____

_____

3. Is this a new problem for your community?

_____Yes _____No
If yes, why do you think this problem has developed?

_____

_____

If no, how long has this issue been a problem in your community?

_____

_____

4. Do you believe other people in your community would identify the same problems?

_____Yes _____No
If no, what else would they list? _____

_____

5. Has any other group, agency or organization (4-H, church, Extension Homemakers, Rotary, Kiwanis, Extension Service, etc.) identified the same problems you identified? _____Yes _____No
If yes, what are they doing to work on the problem?

_____

If no, what is preventing them from working on the
problem? _____

_____

6. Do you believe youth can play a role in working toward a solution to any of the problems you've identified?

_____Yes _____No
If yes, what roles could youth serve?_____

_____

If no, why not?_____

7. What skills do you think youths need in order to work toward solving the problems you've identified?

_____

_____

Organize and summarize the data collected in a manner that points out three or four issues or problems that are potential targets for your group's work. In the space below, list three or four youth-related problems or issues that your efforts have revealed are of prime concern to the people in your community.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Select an Issue or Problem

When groups identify issues, they are saying that the quality of their lives is not satisfactory to them. There is the feeling that something is wrong and that something needs to be done about it.

Often there will not be unanimous agreement on which issue or problem is the most important and should command the attention of your group. Through a democratic process, however, your group needs to select a single issue or problem. The group should consider the following when selecting that focus:

- *Is the group interested in the issue or problem?*
- *How important is the problem or issue?*
- *What is the political atmosphere of the community?*
- *How many people are affected?*
- *Do members of the group have the time to work on it?*
- *Can the group do something about it?*
- *Are resources available to do what is needed?*
- *What currently is being done about the problem? You may find that one or more organizations already are either working singly or together on the problem.*

What issue or problem did your group choose to tackle? _____

Expand the Network

Once your YouthNet 21 group has selected an issue to work on, you will want to build a network of individuals and organizations that has a similar interest. A network is defined as a linkage between two or more individuals, groups or organizations interested in a common concern. The first step in building a network is to identify who else is interested in the problem at hand. Potential groups to contact include those that stand to benefit from the resolution of the issue or problem or those directly affected by it.

The next step is to contact the individuals or representatives of the groups you identify. You may want to involve certain members of your YouthNet 21 group in this activity. Their interest may or may not translate into direct support of your efforts, but it may yield valuable information, expertise; contributions of time or even financial support of your efforts. When this is the case, a collaborative arrangement with those organizations is born.

In the space below, generate a list of individuals, organizations, government agencies, educational institutions or elected officials that might have an interest in the issue your YouthNet 21 group has identified. For each on your list, identify a member of your group who will make the contact to explain what your group is interested in doing.

Who else may be interested?	Who will contact them?
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

When making the contact, the representative of your YouthNet 21 group should briefly state what your group has selected as a project and why it was selected. The person then wants to find out if the individual or organization he is visiting has a similar interest in the issue and what currently is being done in regard to that issue. If it appears that you have similar interests, you may want to invite an individual or representative of the organization to the next meeting of your YouthNet 21 group. They may be interested in becoming a partner in your efforts. If a local coalition already has been established to work on your issue, you may want to offer your support to that group instead of organizing another group.

Determine What You Want to Accomplish

Once you have expanded your YouthNet 21 group, the group must clearly state what it wants to happen. These statements are called objectives.

Objectives identify the state of affairs that your group wants to exist after their program is implemented.

For example, "to help teens increase their knowledge of services and agencies available to them" might be an objective of a YouthNet 21 effort focusing on the availability of counseling about adolescent issues. What are the objectives of your group's efforts?

1 _____

_____

2. _____

_____

3. _____

_____

4. _____

_____

You can use these objectives to determine if your program was a success. (See "Assess Your Results.")

Develop the Plan

At the heart of a successful community effort is a detailed plan for accomplishing the identified objectives. Once you know what outcomes your group wants, determine what needs to happen to achieve these outcomes.

For example, your group wants to help teens increase their knowledge of counseling services available to them. Two possible avenues to accomplish this objective are a teen hotline or a mall booth that would refer teens to the appropriate agency or organization. Here is a list of other possible YouthNet 21 projects.

- *A reference section on contemporary youth issues in a high school or public library.*
- *A tutoring program to help students in danger of dropping out of school.*
- *Role modeling for younger children. Perhaps as leaders for afterschool care programs.*
- *Involvement in the legislative process - perhaps a youth lobby.*
- *Weekend retreats for junior high students.*
- *Alcohol-free activities and parties.*
- *Youth centers.*
- *Communication workshops forparents and teens.*
- *Public service announcements.*
- *Radio shows where teens interview experts on issues of interest to youth.*
- *Teen theater groups that role play contemporary teen situations.*
- *School- or county-wide polls on youth issues.*
- *Incentive programs to stay in school.*
- *Community education courses on youth issues.*
- *Puppet shows for younger children.*
- *Bulletin boards.*
- *Articles or a column on teen issues in school or community newspapers.*

Each approach requires a detailed plan of action. Certain things need to be done in an organized manner if the effort is to succeed. You may want to use the following outline to develop your plan. Use it as a step-by-step guide for achieving your goals.

Step #1

What needs to happen?_____

Who will do it?_____

What resources are needed?_____

Who will provide those resources?_____

Step #2

What needs to happen? _____

Who will do it?_____

What resources are needed?_____

Who will provide those resources?_____

Step #3
What needs to happen? _____

Who will do it?_____

What resources are needed?_____

Who will provide those resources?_____

Step #4
What needs to happen? _____

Who will do it?_____

What resources are needed?_____

Who will provide those resources?_____

Step #5
What needs to happen? _____

Who will do it?_____

What resources are needed?_____

Who will provide those resources?_____

Step #6
What needs to happen? _____

Who will do it?_____

What resources are needed?_____

_____

Who will provide those resources?_____

Step #7
What needs to happen?_____

_____

Who will do it?_____

What resources are needed?_____

_____

Who will provide those resources?_____

Step #8
What needs to happen?_____

_____

Who will do it?_____

What resources are needed?_____

_____

Who will provide those resources?_____

Acquire Needed Resources.

A resource is what is needed to make something happen including money, goods or services. Some often overlooked resources include expertise, knowledge of the issue at hand, time and manpower. Many times community efforts are successful because people or organizations contribute resources required to make a project work.

You already have involved other individuals or organizations in your YouthNet 21 group. Because these individuals were involved in developing your plan of action, they may be willing to contribute needed resources. One may be willing to provide your group with a technical consultant. Another may contribute money. Others may contribute resources such as volunteer labor, facilities or even construction supplies if needed. People are more willing to support your efforts if they are interested in what you are doing and if they are involved in deciding what needs to be done. You may want to keep a log of the contributions.

Carry Out the Plan

Once the plan of action has been made and the resources needed for the project secured, begin carrying out the plan. Make sure all members of your YouthNet 21 group have a role to play in carrying out the plan. Here are some considerations:

• *Who is responsible for seeing that everyone carries out his assigned responsibilities?*
• *Is there an organized system for keeping track of contributions and expenditures?*
• *Have arrangements been made to involve the news media in letting others know about your group's efforts?*
• *Have you made plans to evaluate your progress and make changes in your plans if necessary?*
• *Is someone documenting, keeping a log or taking notes about what is happening? Is someone taking pictures?*
• *Does everyone with an assigned job know where he can get help if he needs it?*

Assess Your Results

The final stage of the planned change is to collect information that will help you decide whether your group's efforts were successful. This information also can be used to tell key decision makers and donors about the need for your efforts to continue as well as to serve as criteria for making adjustments or changes in your program. You also can use evaluation information as you seek recognition for your group's efforts through the 4-H Community Pride Program, other 4-H recognition and other similar programs. This evaluation should involve a broad array of individuals - not just those in your YouthNet 21 group.

One purpose of evaluation is to determine whether the goals and objectives of your efforts were met. Remember the objectives of the program you wrote earlier in the change process? How can you determine if these objectives were realized? Here are several evaluation methods that you can use.

• *Focus Group Interviews* - A group of people is assembled to respond to a carefully selected set of questions. The questions are developed to help gather important data about the program.
• *Written Questions or Suggestion Cards* - These could be filled out by participants during the course of your program.
• *Observation* - The program and/or its participants are observed as the program is carried out.
• *Mailed Questionnaires* - A random or selected sample of individuals responds in writing to a series of predetermined questions.
• *Telephone Interviews* - A random or selected sample of individuals is asked a series of predetermined questions over the telephone.

Evaluation data also provide you with information regarding the way your group's efforts were carried out. Some questions to ask include:

• To what degree were youths involved in planning or carrying out the project or program?

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• Were there things that could have been done differently?
• Were resources used appropriately?
• Were specific jobs carried out effectively and efficiently?
• Was publicity adequate?

After collecting data from one or more of these sources, it is the group's job to use the data to make decisions regarding their efforts. Should the project or program be continued? Are there changes that need to be made?

At times you will find that there is still work to do on the issue. When this is the case, you can continue what you've been doing or you can try a different approach toward resolution of the same problem.

Other times you will find that your efforts resulted in positive changes and that you successfully helped address an important local issue. When this is the case, your YouthNet 21 group may choose to refocus its emphasis and move on to another concern.

A Final Word

The model presented in this manual can be used as a framework for work on a wide variety of problems or issues. The model is a framework for action - not a

solution. For the model to work, young people must view themselves as resources to their community and be willing to assume leadership roles in dealing with issues that affect them.

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Keeping Track:
Recording Your Experiences

1. List some new things that you learned as a result of your involvement in YouthNet 21. _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. What program did your YouthNet 21 group choose to work on? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Briefly describe this program. _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. What roadblocks did you encounter in carrying out your program? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. How did the attitudes of adults help or hinder accomplishment of your goals? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. Did your program have an impact on the issue? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. What would you have done differently? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____