Fund for the City of New York
Youth Development Institute
Networks for Youth Development

Primary Person System
Symposium Report

*The **Benefits** Shared*

*The **Challenges** Faced*

*The **Strategies** Utilitized*

FUND for the CITY of NEW YORK

April 2000

Author:
Ateba Doughty

Designer: John Won

Neworks for Youth Development

Networks for Youth Development
partnering agency members are:

Alianza Dominicana

Good Shepherd Services

Aspira of New York

Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood House

Center for Family Life

Jobs for Youth

Children's Aid Society

Phipps Community Development Corp.

Chinatown YMCA

Project Reach Youth

East Harlem Tutorial Program

Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center

Forest Hills Community House

The Door

The Fund for the City of New York
http://www.fcny.org

121 Sixth Avenue
New York, NY 10013

tel (212) 925-6675
fax (212) 925-5675

Networks
for Youth
Development

On April 23rd, 1999, *Networks for Youth Development*, a project of the Youth Development Institute (YDI) of the Fund for the City of New York, held a symposium to discuss and examine the benefits, challenges, and strategies of a primary person system in youth programs.

A primary person system is designed to provide all youth with specialized attention in one-to-one relationships with youth workers. In this system, staff and youth track a young person's progress over time, revise plans, and coordinate resources.

The symposium audience was comprised of the fourteen *Networks* partnering agencies. The day began at 9:30 AM. During the course of the day a guest speaker presented theoretical evidence and affirmed the importance of implementing and maintaining a primary person system.

For practical examples, representatives from various *Networks* agencies explained exactly how and why their primary person system works. A young person from one of the presenting agencies also shared how a primary person system helped him develop into a positive adult.

After a morning of sharing and learning, the audience broke into small groups to exchange views, ideas, and opinions over lunch. Facilitated by YDI, each group had a resource person from the presenting agencies to help answer any questions or concerns.

Description of Day:

First, relevant research was presented. Then actual practitioners/colleagues, who were in the process of practicing such a system, also presented. These practioners shared the benefits, strategies and challenges of implementing and successfully maintaining a primary person system.

Networks *for* Youth Development

Networks for Youth Development is a partnership between YDI and 14 community-based youth organizations whose goals are to strengthen the field of youth services in New York City; increase opportunities for staff development; improve organizational structure; and ensure that youth development programs are designed to meet the developmental needs of youth and to assist youth in building a set of core assets and competencies needed to participate successfully in adolescent and adult life.

In 1996, *Networks for Youth Development* created the Best Practices Committee. The objective of the committee was to combine theory, research, discussion, and practical experience to identify best practices in the field of youth development. These practices are seen as crucial in supporting the positive development of young people within agencies working with youth. The committee also was charged with testing and disseminating the information once it was defined.

The committee was comprised of practitioners from the participating *Networks* partnering community-based youth organizations. The committee spent approximately a year debating and researching specific practices that they felt were best practices—practices that should be at the core of all organizations

that work with young people. After a lot of diligent and meticulous work, a comprehensive list was ultimately developed as Best Practices.

The Best Practices list was divided into various categories. The categories were: Organizational Structure that is Supportive of Youth, Environmental Factors to which Special Attention has been Focused, a Holistic Approach to Young People, Opportunities for Contribution, Caring and Trusting Relationships, High Expectations, Engaging Activities, and Factors that Promote Continuity for Youth in the Programs. A handbook was published by *Networks for Youth Development* called *A Guided Tour of Youth Development*. In it the categories are carefully examined.

The committee then agreed to field test the Best Practices by conducting peer assessments of each other. The committee designed assessment tools based solely on the Best Practices finalized in *A Guided Tour of Youth Development*. An assessment team was comprised of two staff people from YDI, two youth workers from different organizations within *Networks*, two young people between the ages of 15–21 and a person from the agency being assessed. The assessment team conducted interviews with the Executive

enjoying success or experiencing challenges from their primary person systems and create a channel of communication between them and the *Networks* members who do not have a formalized primary person system.

The committee hoped that this symposium would provide a first hand view of the many benefits that such a system has to offer. Further, the committee desired to provide a forum for analyzing the various challenges that are associated with a primary person system and sharing recommended strategies.

The *Networks* Dissemination committee decided to stay in unison with the spirit of *Networks for Youth Development* and design the day to reflect the process utilized to establish *Networks*. *Networks* has based and prided itself on fusing theoretical, ideological, and practical experience to reach one common goal. This, therefore, was the design of the symposium.

Networks for Youth Development

Primary Person System Symposium / **Keynote Speaker** **Joy G. Dryfoos** 3

Ms. Dryfoos started off her presentation by updating the audience on current events that affect the field of youth development. She brought to the audience's attention that a threat has been made to cut youth services by 23 million dollars. She proceeded to briefly touch upon the tragic "Littleton story."†

Ms. Dryfoos then started explaining the importance of one-on-one relationships, "If I were to start my own youth program, I would figure out how to formalize structural relationships between youth and youth workers." She noted that the discussion of this subject was extremely timely. Intuition, research, and personal life experience all demonstrate that a primary person is an essential ingredient in the development of young people. "However, it's one thing to say it's a good thing... and another thing to actually practice it... or as I always say, I wrote the book, now you go and do it."

"There is plenty of literature that serves as evidence to prove that a responsible adult is very important in the life force of young people... kids who make it invariably have some kind of supportive parental involvement or some kind of supportive person."

Joy G. Dryfoos is an unaffiliated researcher, writer and lecturer, from Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. Since 1984 she has concentrated on a long term project on "youth-at-risk" focusing on the integration of the knowledge base in four separate fields: substance abuse, delinquency, school failure and teen pregnancy. Dryfoos's major work includes *Adolescent-at-Risk: Prevalence and Prevention* and *Full Service Schools* and *Safe Passage: Making it Through Adolescence in a Risky Society*. Dryfoos was the recipient of the Irving Cushner Award from the National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association in 1990 and of the Carl Schulz Award from the Population and Family Health Section of the American Public Health Association in 1992.

Ms. Dryfoos based this quote upon resiliency literature and at-risk literature.

Ms. Dryfoos then discussed the Search Institute and the research they perform surrounding youth. She focused on the surveys they conducted on youth within the sixth to twelfth grades. The survey revealed that two-thirds of the youth reported high

---

† The tragic event in which two young people opened fire, randomly shooting students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

levels of family support. Nevertheless, only a fourth had positive family communication.

Only younger age children were willing to seek advice and counsel from parents. The older the child, the fewer adults he or she could rely on.

Keynote Speaker: Joy Dryfoos

Ms. Dryfoos noted that many of her colleagues in adolescent research have issued statements on this subject. Michael Resnick of the University of Minnesota School of Public Health wrote an article sharing his research on the primary person system. In the article Mr. Resnick is quoted saying "the most important finding of our research is that young people need a strong sense of caring from at least one competent adult." Mr. Resnick also points out that there is less parental time available to be devoted to children's needs. He went one step further and quantified it, "there has been a loss of ten to twelve hours per week since 1960 of parental time devoted to children." Ann Masten of the Institute of Child Development and the University of Minnesota says, "children who experience chronic adversity fare better and recover at a quicker pace when they have a positive relationship with a competent adult."

Ms. Dryfoos then started to explore the different styles of parenting and how this applies to youth work. The three styles she mentioned were authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian. "An authoritative parent has high expectations, firm enforcement of standards, and open communication. A permissive parent makes few demands and does not pay close attention to monitoring youth. An authoritarian parent has high demands, is very punitive, and extremely low in responsiveness. Children with authoritative parents do better in schools and show steady increase in social skills, achievement, motivation, and self reliance." Ms. Dryfoos then pointed out that not all youth have an authoritative parent. Therefore, a lot of room for correction and improvement is left. "If the majority of parents were experiencing parental success, schools were performing at an above average rate, and neighborhoods were safer, there would be no need for any of us… that is why I believe youth work should be presented as the highest form of surrogate parenting."

Ms. Dryfoos then presented the audience with specific programs and the findings from research done to analyze the affect these programs have on youth. Both the Big Brothers-Big Sisters program and the Quantum Opportunities program have conducted thorough research on the various ways they impact and effect youth.

The research on Big Brothers-Big Sisters was performed by the organization Public/Private Ventures. Gary Walker, President of Public/Private Ventures and a leader in the field of youth development, commented on the research performed on the Big Brothers-Big Sisters program. He said, "the findings provide evidence that there is in fact, something that works. It works by engineering the hardest of all things… engineering a human relationship." Ms. Dryfoos went on to add that the Big Brothers-Big Sisters program showed a "reduction in drug use, and improved school achievement not by targeting drug use or grades but by meeting the universal need of young people… which is consistent support from an adult friend." Ms. Dryfoos believes the material is extremely helpful in that it delineates two different types of relationships between young people and adults in the program. A developmental approach and a prescriptive approach were

"The **impact** this program had on me will never die....

The people at Quantum have replaced some of my old views with new ones.

I love them like they were my own family. You may ask, Why?

They looked after me and stuck with me. **They gave me their best,**

and **it's up to me to give someone else my best."**

Keynote Speaker: Joy Dryfoos

the two different types of relationships contrasted.

Ms. Dryfoos then started to discuss the dynamic characteristics needed to foster a developmental relationship according to research done by Public/Private Ventures. "In the beginning the mentors establish a strong connection with youth… then start to address other issues such as strengthening the youth's good habits. They took their time developing their relationship; they were sensitive to the youth's satisfaction with the relationship and incorporated the young person into decision making; they demonstrated attachment in the sense of commitment; they allowed youth to talk freely, particularly regarding family issues, without being judgmental or reproachful; they were all very reassuring and good listeners. Their main purpose was to provide an opportunity and support youth did not currently have."

Ms. Dryfoos then touched upon the prescriptive approach: "Volunteers using this approach have the mentality that they are going to change the young people they serve. They set ground rules and their own goals for young people. They are goal oriented and inflexible. Their expectations were unrealistic. The adults required youth to share the responsibility for maintaining the relationship and in some cases left it entirely on the young

person's shoulders. The main purpose of the prescriptive people were to guide the youth toward adult values."

Ms. Dryfoos then stressed that the research performed on Big Brothers–Big Sisters also showed inter-racial matching was a success. It works as well as matching young people with an adult from the same race.

Ms. Dryfoos then started to discuss the Quantum Opportunities program. The Quantum Opportunities program is a four-year sequence program of 250 hours a year. It is held daily after school and on Saturdays. Young people are offered computerized learning and youth development services and perform community service activities. It is coordinated by a caring adult counselor who serves as a mentor, role model, big brother, etc. Stipends are given to each young person everyday after school. The young people sign a contract with their parents present. Commitment is stressed from the very beginning to both parties, mentors along with young people. The youth workers in this program wear beepers. Young people are allowed to contact their mentors 24 hours of the day. They visit the young people at home. Their caseload is very small, consisting of 20–25 kids. Counselors receive a monthly incentive payment.

Research from the Quantum Opportunity program showed that participants in the program did better in school, had more employment opportunities, were less likely to become teen parents, and were more involved in their community. All of the young people in the program were interviewed. One of the participants in the program said: "The impact this program had on me will never die. I believe it will grow and enable me to make an impact on our younger generation. The people at Quantum have replaced some of my old views with new ones. I love them like they were my own family. You may ask, Why? They looked after me and stuck with me. They gave me their best, and it's up to me to give someone else my best."

Ms. Dryfoos made it clear that having a supportive adult in the lives of young people is very important. She then addressed the question of who this supportive adult should be and gave recommendations on how to move toward a primary person system. Ms. Dryfoos believes it could be a lot of different people—though it is usually very few and in some cases no one at all. It could be a "parent, aunt, uncle, teacher, trained youth worker, case manager, social worker, clergy, and a member of the community."

Ms. Dryfoos then shared her recommendations: "I would like to see a program or system set up in pre-kindergarten or at birth where every child or adolescent has some sort of enrollment to be assigned a primary person— a responsible adult, staff person, or volunteer… We should have individual assessment plans for everybody along with an intake form. Obviously, if the family is supportive and competent, you don't need to be as intricate. However, many kids who go to social agencies don't have a supportive family atmosphere. It's not a matter of filling out forms

when young people walk in the door… but you have to track their progress, give support, and provide them with various services to better develop that young person, making sure no one falls through the cracks. In this system, there has to be attention paid to resources because no one primary person can solve everybody's problems right then and there. [There should be] an adequate listening support in the community with contact people already lined up.

"Then there must be follow-up. If you are going to use volunteers they must be screened carefully. I personally would not let just anybody work with young people. Training volunteers is also very important. Training is one of the main reasons why the Big Brother-Big Sisters program is successful. They believe training helps build a solid relationship with the volunteer, in turn showing them how to build a solid relationship with youth.

"Supervision in volunteer programs, as in professional programs, is absolutely necessary. Continuity or staff turnover can be a problem. Constantly changing mentors is not going to be helpful. Staff communication is also a key factor. Sitting down and really talking, understanding what the dynamics are from kid to kid. Time and space can also be detrimental. You must have space for confidential sessions."

Ms. Dryfoos concluded her presentation with a vote of confidence and reassurance, "Now I know this is a pretty tall order to fill and you can do it together. One thing for sure, there is a huge need for responsible adults to step up and become someone's primary person…."

14

Networks *for* Youth Development

Primary Person System Symposium / **Panel Discussion** 4

The term primary person system is relatively new. The concept, nevertheless, has been embedded historically in the field of youth development. After presenting the theoretical evidence, the panel of practitioners presented practical experience that can be shared and adopted.

After the first round of peer assessments in 1996 it was clear that though everyone agreed that having a formalized primary person system is a best practice beneficial to all, many of the member agencies in *Networks* were having problems making the transition from theory to practice. Three *Networks* agencies that were implementing and maintaining a primary person system—The Door, Children's Aid Society, and Good Shepherd Services— agreed to share the many benefits they are experiencing as a result of utilizing a primary person system. The three agencies also shared the challenges they faced trying to implement a primary person system—and still face trying to maintain success within their primary person system. They also shared various strategies used to combat the challenges they faced and are facing. Howard Knoll, Director of Youth Services of Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center was the Chair of the Dissemination Committee and moderator for the symposium; he introduced the panel of practitioners.

I. THE CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY

The Children's Aid Society was the first agency to present at the symposium. The Children's Aid Society developed their primary person system as a result of the *Networks for Youth Development* assessment process. Ms. Jessica Chambliss, then Coordinator of Youth Development Services at the agency's Dunlevy Milbank Center spoke on their behalf. Ms. Chambliss started off her presentation by expressing exactly how she felt about youth development: "Youth development work is very important to me; the young people we serve are the reason why." She then shared her sentiments and memories of serving as a part of the Best Practices Committee: "I am very proud to have served on the committee that is respon- sible for creating the various handbooks that have been instrumental in making positive changes in the field of youth development. In the beginning, we all agreed it is crucial for young people to have responsible, caring and trusting relationships with positive adults in their lives… my initial thought was 'hey, this is being done at The Children's Aid Society.' Everyone involved in youth work does this… we are all in a primary person role."

"In the first assessment performed at The Children's Aid Society, many of the young

people interviewed said yes, we do have someone that we can go to and share any problems, questions, or concerns we may be experiencing. When asked who is this person, many of the young people answered and said, 'Jessica.' This was very disturbing. It made me think if there are 30 young people and I am the primary person for 20 of these young people, where do the other 10 go? Do they go to someone else or do they just leave and deal with whatever was bothering them all by themselves. Not wanting any young people to fall through the cracks because there is no justifiable reason for this to happen… we began to formalize our primary person system to ensure no one is left out on their own to deal with life's worries and concerns."

The Children's Aid Society uses everyone as a primary person. They believe everyone should be involved in the process if they spend time with youth in the program. The more time spent, obviously the more opportunities for solid relationships to be built.

Another reason The Children's Aid Society began to formalize their primary person system is because in the Center a lot of young people were not receiving information concerning opportunities that could benefit them, especially those who had not developed relationships with staff for a number of reasons: they were new to the Center, did not regularly visit the Center, etc. The Children's Aid Society then began to formalize the system to ensure that all members were

attending the Center regularly, actively participating in programs, being informed, and taking advantage of all services and opportunities available to them.

Ms. Chambliss then addressed how The Children's Aid Society manages the issues surrounding capacity. The Children's Aid Society uses everyone as a primary person. They believe everyone should be involved in the process if they spend time with youth in the program. Assignments are based upon the amount of time staff spends with a particular group. The more time spent, obviously the more opportunities for solid relationships to be built. For example, the dance instructor is a primary person. She is at the Center three nights a week, three hours per night. She is a part time worker. Some of the girls in the Center only come for dance. The Children's Aid Society makes sure the dance instructor is fully aware of the other program components and the various opportunities available. It is now her responsibility as these young people's primary person to share this information with her group and to get information out to their parents. She monitors their attendance, calls home if they are absent twice in a week, checks report cards, and above all notifies appropriate staff if there are any concerns. She is kept aware of her young people's participation or lack of it in other program areas because other staff members know they can and are supposed to communicate with her concerning the young people in her group. This cultivates nurturing, holistic growth and development.

Ms. Chambliss then gave some helpful hints for organizations to get staff fully involved and to take ownership in the primary person system. She suggested staff members receive a list of youngsters for whom they are responsible. Staff can add to the list and update it as

membership increases. This helps staff feel a sense of ownership, belonging, and that they are needed. They should also have access to registration files. Staff should receive information in the form of a memo with all of the expected requirements clearly outlined.

Staff should also be required to introduce young people to other staff and members of the organization. The organization does not want any particular staff member to mean "everything" to a young person. This is one of the strategies shared by Ms. Chambliss to help deal with staff turnover. When a staff person leaves the organization, the last thing you want is for a young person or persons to leave the organization also.

Developing relationships with their parents or other significant adults in young people's lives is also encouraged. It is important to remember that young people are connected to families and loved ones that also share in the responsibility of developing this young person into a positive adult.

Ms. Chambliss then shared some of the benefits young people and the organization experienced from a formalized primary person system: "Positive relationships between youth and caring adults, increase in consistent attendance, increase in program participation… more youth experiencing a wider range of opportunities that enhance personal growth and development, increase in youth achieving positive outcomes, and staff accountability."

Ms. Chambliss then summed up her presentation with a story.

"A few years ago one of our coaches came to me very excited about a young man that joined our basketball team. The young man was an excellent player. I soon realized he was 17 years old and in the tenth grade. I then reviewed the young man's application and even though he had achieved all city status, it was clear he could not read, write, or spell. I asked the coach if he had been aware of this. He said he did not look at the young man's application. He then asked me what's the big deal? Needless to say that this coach was only about basketball and championships. The coach is no longer with us. He was not about youth development. We know young people do not come to our centers or participate in our programs because we offer job readiness, sex education, or educational enhancement opportunities. It's up to us as youth workers to recognize the needs and to connect our young people to the proper supports that will make a difference in the quality of their lives."

Ms. Chambliss then gave final encouragement: "Identifying the right staff to take on this responsibility may take time, and changes

Panel Discussion

"**We know young people** do not come to our centers or participate in our programs because we offer job readiness, sex education, or educational enhancement opportunities. **It's up to us as youth workers to recognize the needs and to connect our young people to the proper supports that will make a difference in the quality of their lives.**"

"The first time a young person meets their primary person is very critical. First impressions are heavily measured by youth. The initial meeting oftentimes is the most important."

The Door
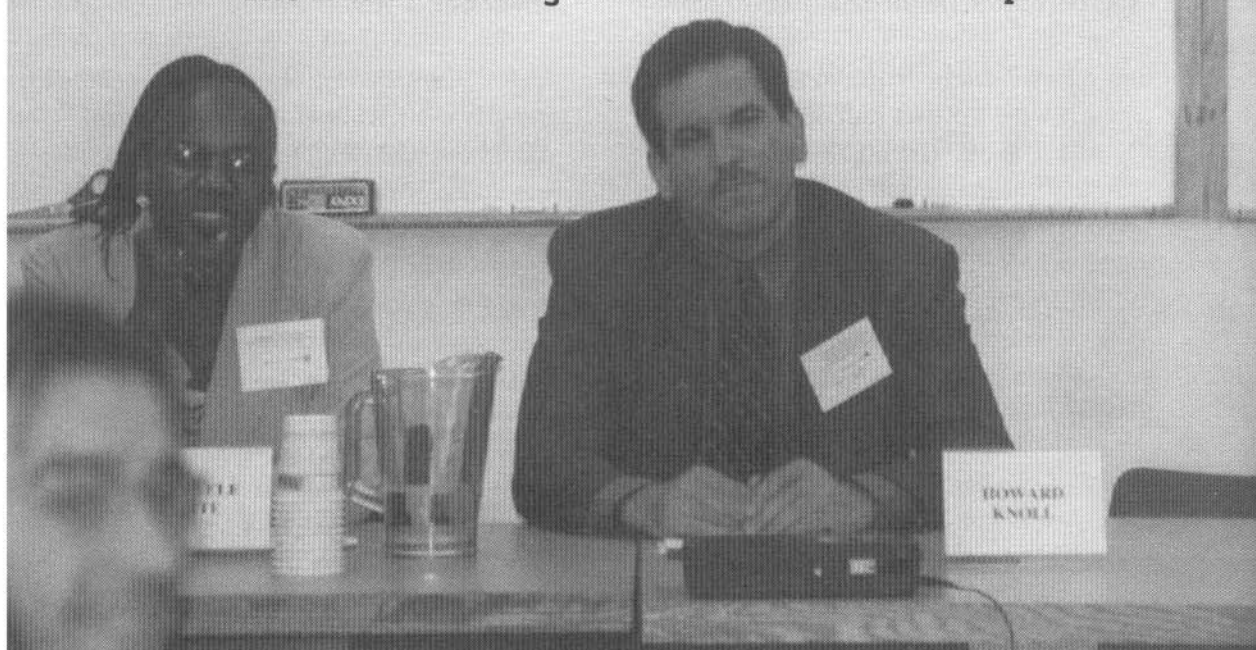
may have to be made along the way. Nevertheless we have to give it our best shot. We owe it to the young people that depend on us. For many teens, having a primary person who is committed to helping them achieve positive outcomes will make all the difference in how they live their lives today and in the future."

II. THE DOOR

The Door was the second agency to present at the symposium. Ms. Michaele White, then Co-Executive Director represented The Door.

Ms. White began by discussing some of the challenges her organization faces trying to maintain a rather large primary person system. "I think some of the challenges we face are

due to the issues of numbers and capacity.... The concept of a primary person system is the core of youth development. I was fortunate to be part of The Door in 1972 when the primary person system did not exist as we know it now. In those early days, we talked about the mission and goals, we started talking about how important it is to create a caring atmosphere, where young people could come and feel a sense of trust and connection. In 1972, we served approximately 120 young people a day, with a team of volunteers because funding was not available for the first 18 months. We had a concept of a primary family... we talked about surrogate parenting—to have every staff member know every single young person. It was feasible for us to be able to sit down and discuss individual care plans for every young person because our organization was small enough to

allow us to do so. Even very early back then, we knew that it was important to assure that there was at least one staff person who knew a specific young person and knew him or her well—a staff person that would help to guide that young person toward reaching his or her fullest potential." In 1998, 7,400 different young people came to The Door. About 5,700 of them became Door members.

Ms. White then noted: "The Door very often has to balance the concept of case management regarding service delivery within the primary person system when dealing with large numbers of young people and offering a wide array of comprehensive services. The issue of analyzing the other supports that really reinforce the role of the primary person is equally important in affirming that the environment is structured to be supportive of a primary person system."

Ms. White then described the intricate details that make The Door's primary person system successful. "Setting up an environment that really supports the high expectations that we have of young people, especially when working with large numbers of young people, requires a conscious effort to be made on behalf of the young person. Young people often come to The Door for the many services we provide. Young people without urgent needs are encouraged to call and make an appointment with membership services. At that point they receive what we call an initial interview. An initial interview is an extensive psychological assessment that helps The Door assess exactly where this young person stands academically, physically, and psychologically as well as in other life areas. After the initial assessment, a young person is then assigned to the area of their greatest interest. Then that young person is assigned to a primary person in the same service area. An appointment is

then made for the young person to meet his or her primary person. The first time a young person meets their primary person is very critical. First impressions are heavily measured by youth. The initial meeting oftentimes is the most important."

The Door firmly believes in the importance of staff being able to communicate with each other on a regular basis. The Door holds weekly team meetings where staff from various resource areas get together periodically. The team meetings serve as a forum to allow a primary person to get feedback from other staff members. Staff training and staff development is also conducted on a regular basis. The Door believes it is important for all youth workers to be a "generalist in adolescent development and youth development areas." Staff training is held at least once a month. This allows staff to be brought up to date with various youth development issues. This will help staff increase their effectiveness as primary persons allowing them to better understand the field of youth development.

The Door is in the process of reviewing the affect of programs such as health, education, and counseling programs. They are also looking into building better evaluation tools and methodologies to analyze the overall success of the development of competencies on a broader range.

Ms. White then graciously offered to share part of her presentation time with a young Door member who was a direct beneficiary of The Door's primary person system. The Door believes the best evidence is concrete evidence. This allowed the audience to hear a young person's perspective on the benefits, challenges, and strategies of a primary person system.

Panel Discussion

ATEBA DOUGHTY, former youth participant at The Door

The effects these relationships have on youth are invaluable. The Door called upon a young person that was a direct product of their primary person system to share insight on how their system was run. He shared many examples of how participating in a primary person system was beneficial to him. One point he stated that stood out far above the rest was: the relationship he formed with his primary person helped him later on in life be more trusting of adults in general. "The relationship with his primary person was directly responsible for creating a ripple effect that will probably last with him for the rest of his life."
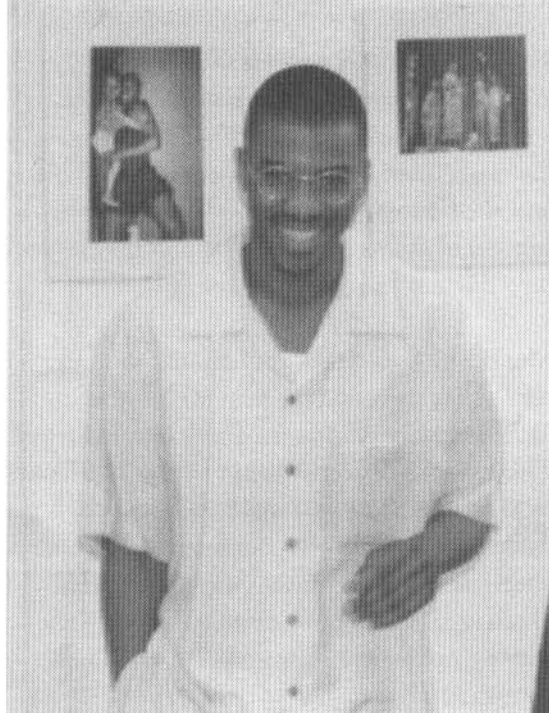
It was a pleasant surprise to everyone to have a young person that was a direct product of a successful primary person system present and share how he felt about a primary person system and why he felt this way.

Ateba Doughty, a 20-year-old, well-spoken young man, addressed the audience very politely and respectfully. He started off by sharing how difficult young people can be in recognizing opportunities and why it is so important to have a positive adult to help steer them in the best direction for them to achieve their maximum potential.

Mr. Doughty began telling the story of how he first heard about The Door and first met his primary person. "I was in high school one day and a counselor of mine introduced me to The Door and the many services they provide. I soon after went through the enrollment process and was assigned a primary person. I expressed to the person in charge of intake that my main reason for coming to The Door was to get help in finding a job. Subsequently, my primary person was the job counselor. I met with my primary person and inquired how I could get The Door to find me a job. She informed me dysfunctional rescuing was not practiced at The Door thus, we do not find you a job we teach you the skills needed for you to be able to find yourself a job. At the time, I could not see the significance or difference in the two methods. She explained there was a one-month course I had to complete in order for me to be recommended to employers. I instantly decided this program was not what I was looking for.

I kindly declined the opportunity to take the class. Now, my primary person recognized I wanted a job and periodically suggested I join the class. I would tell her a different excuse every time she asked me why I had not joined

1980, South Brooklyn Community High School opened its doors to youth and the community. Since then the program has provided youth with a full day academic program with small classes, individualized counseling and a core of intensive leadership development activities.

Good Shepherd Services

Ms. Henriquez-McArdle began to share when and why her organization decided to implement a primary person system there. "Early in our work, we recognized that the older youth were detached from adults. We believed the young participants in the program needed a caring environment—an environment that allowed them the opportunity to engage with adults, to re-engage with their families, and to develop a peer network of support. In recognizing these needs, we constructed a primary person system."

Ms. Henriquez-McArdle decided that before she described their primary person system, she would share one of the graduation speeches that she thinks best reflects a young person's experience in the program.

"I would like to start off by congratulating my fellow graduates. Tonight is a very special joyous occasion; but to be honest, I'm sad and scared. It is hard to move on after experiencing South Brooklyn and all the wonderful people I have met here. I will never forget the people, personalities, moments, the anger, strength, and strug-gles we have all faced in the past. I will also never forget the emotions, thoughts, and caring shared by all. I have learned a lot about life, people, the world, and most of all about myself. A lot of people brought out things in me I never thought were in me. The relationships that I have made at South Brooklyn mean a lot to me. I will admit when I first came to South Brooklyn the staff, counselors, and teachers expressed how much they cared. My immediate reaction was, who do these people think they are kidding? I was shortly proven wrong. During my second year at South Brooklyn, I was going through a lot. My life had suddenly become real tough. I started to feel as though I had no one except my counselor and he was only at school. On October 15, 1999, I almost lost my life. My friends and family were devastated. It became hard to fight for my life when I felt no one cared whether I lived or died. That's when I learned how many people loved and cared about me. My counselor, the director, stepped out of their roles and became friends to my family and I. They helped me realize how important my life is. They gave me love and support. I do not know where I would be without them. So for all of the above reasons I say thank you and I love you. I will never forget all you taught me, all the words you engraved in my heart. Most of all I will not forget your friendship and love."

"The relationships that I have made at South Brooklyn mean a lot to me. I will admit when I first came to South Brooklyn the staff, counselors, and teachers expressed how much they cared. My immediate reaction was, who do these people think they are kidding? I was shortly proven wrong.

24

After the touching letter, Ms. Henriquez-McArdle began to describe their system: "In our primary person system we have carefully defined each team member's role to make it possible for youth to work with program expectations. For example, if your counselor is your advocate and there is a disciplinary problem, then it is the responsibility of the site coordinator to address the infraction in the presence of the counselor and student. The counselor's role in this setting is to help the youth understand the implications of their behavior and work with the youth to identify ways in which they might be able to change this behavior. In this way no youth is left to feel alone or powerless. Neither does he or she feel betrayed or conflicted in their relationship to their advocate counselor. Students often describe their counselors as their friends—the people who have stood by their sides through the good times and the hard times until they succeeded.

"The teachers also support this system by raising academic and behavioral concerns with counselors so there is an opportunity to address issues in a timely and respectful fashion. When necessary, we may arrange for a teacher, counselor, student and site coordinator conference to identify an issue and seek resolution. All members leave the table having made a commitment to do their part to effect change."

Ms. Henriquez-McArdle then shared evidence that Good Shepherd Services is positively developing its young people. "The majority of our students come to us clear in the desire to earn a high school diploma. However, in the many different descriptions of their early school experiences, the theme is all too familiar. 'The teachers don't care if you learn or not, they just want to get paid. Nobody tried to help me when I was having trouble with my schoolwork, they don't even know my name.' The first task then is to build relationships with each young person that will provide them with a sense of safety and belonging and gradually build the expectations for achievement. Many of our youth graduate from high school and go on to college, others graduate and go to training programs or full time jobs. Even the small percentage of young people that leave the program move on to GED programs and/or jobs. They are all varying examples of success."

Ms. Henriquez-McArdle's presentation was extremely helpful as it showed the audience that there is no set format for a successful primary person system. Each system varies in its construction to beneficially enhance the atmosphere of the organization. A primary person system is successful when it is reflective and made to serve youth utilizing the principles of youth development. Though articulated in distinct ways, all of the panelists' presentations confirmed that "Caring and Trusting" relationships are necessary to establish a youth development foundation. And a primary person system is clearly the highway of choice chosen by theory, research, and practical experience to best achieve Caring and Trusting relationships for all young people in youth development programs.

"A Primary Person System is Vital to the Youth Development Approach"

The latter part of the program was designed for group discussions. The audience of practitioners from *Networks for Youth Development* organizations and funders broke up into three groups. Each group had several resource people from the presenting agencies that spotlighted their primary person systems earlier (The Door, Children's Aid Society and Good Shepherd Services). The presenting agencies each went further in depth explaining their particular system. Each had unique matching criteria and constructed their system differently.

The topical discussion groups served as a forum for the diverse audience to reflect upon the information that was shared earlier concerning primary person systems. A lot of the information was challenging to many in the audience. Though the establishment of a primary person system had been adopted as a Best Practice by *Networks* membership, it had never been discussed in such depth.

The audience eagerly anticipated the topical discussion groups. Many had questions, experiences and personal views that they were anxious to discuss. Questions and answers were flowing, and in many cases advice was offered. The groups brainstormed benefits, grappled with challenges and planned different strategies to conquer the challenges. The overall advantages were examined not just for the youth participants, but for the entire agency.

I. BENEFITS

Creating a "village"

One benefit shared was the very close relationship that is often established with the young person's parents. It was noted that when relationships between the primary person, parents, and youth are formed, youth start to view their primary person as a big brother or big sister. The reference was even made to the adage "It takes a village to raise a child." It was agreed upon that when a parent, a primary person, and youth come together for one cause—the development of that child— the proverbial village is created that can help develop the child into a productive citizen. A primary person system can be an immeasurable help for parents. Many parents use their child's primary person as a second or third set of eyes and ears. This can help ease the strain and offer some momentary peace of mind for parents.

Caring Relationships

Another benefit discussed was that a primary person system fosters "long lasting caring relationships." This is one dynamic quality of the relationships that are formed in a primary person system that is often overlooked. There is evidence that these positive relationships developed through a primary person system routinely continue even after the young person has left the program through young people calling upon and meeting with their primary person. It is not unusual for youth to continue to have contact with their primary person even into their adult lives.

Positive relationships with positive adults are essential in the development of youth. Some young people are very impressionable and it is recommended for them to have a strong voice of reason easily accessible to them. It is a known fact that during the adolescent stage some youth have problems communicating with their parents. Having a caring adult present is truly valuable as youth go through life's changes and heartaches. One participant noted, "When youth are experiencing emotional turmoil, feelings they are holding inside… may… lead to them making rash decisions. These decisions may not have been necessarily made if their primary person… was there to console them and be that positive voice of reasoning."

Personalized Attention

Every young person needs a caring adult. Not every young person is going to say "Help. I have a need." Therefore, having a system where youths' needs are examined and questioned helps make sure that no one falls through the cracks.

A successful primary person system puts an end to the old saying "the squeaky wheel gets the oil," because the system is constructed to make certain that all young people get personalized attention from their own primary person. This is one of the core elements that's used as a building block for the foundation of youth development. Youth development is best described as a system that is designed not

---

Independent Living Skills:

These skills are noted in another handbook published by *Networks for Youth Development* called Positive Youth Outcomes as a necessary personal competency youth should develop while participating in youth development programs. A primary person system also teaches youth **Independent Living Skills.**

"At the same time you are communicating and establishing a trusting relationship with youth you are supposed to be teaching them **how to gain access to services** around them, how to advocate and locate resources." After locating these resources you must teach them **how to maximize the benefits** of the resources to best help themselves.

Youth development is best described as a system that is designed not only to help develop all youth but to acknowledge that all youth need assistance in developing at some period or another.

only to help develop all youth but to acknowledge that all youth need assistance in developing at some period or another. Traditionally, youth are not given personalized attention until they fall into the category of being "at risk." The youth development philosophy incorporates the idea that if all youth are given personalized attention it will drastically lessen the number of youth that end up being labeled as "youth at risk."

Nurturing the Growth of Youth

A primary person system is designed to help nurture the mental and physical growth of youth. Qualified adults "assess" youth and recognize their needs so that they may direct and guide youth to the resources that best satisfy their needs. One of the main roles of a primary person is to help young people form other positive relationships. The contact with a primary person can become one of the most important influential relationships young people will form in their early adolescent through late adolescent days.

Holistic Approach

One person in the group said that a "primary person does not mean an exclusive person. In actuality you were not handing the kid off to the art instructor… You were using your role as a primary person to help that young person make other positive relationships." The new relationship formed can often be even more beneficial to the development of that young person. A holistic approach identifies and

Topical Lunch Groups

II. CHALLENGES

Most of the agencies in attendance had some sort of system set up to monitor the development of the young participants in their programs. However, after hearing the benefits of having a formal primary person system from the research aspect, from colleagues and from a young person that is a direct product of the primary person system, the benefits of the system became clearer. Everyone was compelled to reflect on their own system, whether formal or informal, and come up with ways to improve it.

This vibrant discussion led to the group examining the different challenges that exist in successfully running and implementing an effective primary person system. Some of the concerns requiring further exploration are the following:

Matching

What if the young person does not feel comfortable speaking to his or her primary person and holds feelings inside or takes them to another source?

Exactly how much flexibility is allowed within a primary person system? How do we deal with young people that have prejudices or biases? Should there ever be a reason to switch someone's primary person? Is there any benefit in matching young people with their primary person based on gender or race?

develops the many facets of young people's personalities.

Among the responsibilities of a primary person is to help youth make a connection to other staff people who can share in the responsibility of helping the young person develop. This is an essential element of being an effective primary person. The primary person must make connections from one program component to another to ensure that development is holistic, providing youth with opportunities and supports. A primary person must assess the child's needs and be able to recognize that a co-worker may be in charge of a particular program from which the young person may benefit. For example, the young person may mention that they are interested in law. A co-worker may exist who directs the job readiness program and is having a career panel. One of the presenters on the panel is a lawyer. Because the primary person spent time with the young person and found out they are interested in this career, he or she can now present the opportunity to the young person and encourage them to go. As another person in the group mentioned "even as a primary person you are not the only person."

The primary person must make **connections** from one program component to another to ensure that **development is holistic,** providing youth with opportunities and supports.

Interdisciplinary meetings... giving staff members an opportunity to update each other on their participants and gain assistance if necessary is extremely helpful in maintaining a primary person system.

Boundaries

What sort of boundaries should be set? Where do supervisors draw the line? Is giving out your phone number or address allowed? When is a primary person in danger of crossing over into the role of a surrogate parent? Should the nature of the relationship change when youth reach adulthood?

What can be done when the primary person starts feeling a sense of ownership over the young person? What can be done if the primary person becomes territorial and stops turning to other staff for input?

Management

Is a primary person system really feasible for agencies that serve an extremely large population of youth? Can there be a guarantee that all young people will benefit from a primary person system? Is it possible to ensure that no one will be overlooked especially with the common factors that often plague youth development programs: understaffing, budget cuts, and lack of funding?

Is adding the responsibility of being someone's primary person too much to ask of staff? Many people in the group felt as though "there are never enough hours in a day." Many youth workers in youth development programs are wearing various hats and are already performing numerous jobs within the agency.

What happens when a program suddenly starts to expand at a very fast pace and there is an inability to expand the number of primary people to compensate for the increase in youth?

Can supervisors effectively supervise primary person staff while at the same time managing their own caseloads?

Is there anything that can be done to help staff with their caseload? Should there be a specific time designated for meeting with young people, making phone calls, etc.?

Everyone in the discussion group agreed that in order to make a primary person system work, you need training along with support. What type of training is recommended to prevent staff from getting the feeling of being "obligated to youth versus their administrative duties?" Also staff are at times caught in the middle between the oath of confidentiality promised to youth and passing on relevant information to their supervisor.

Transition

How is it handled when a staff member leaves the agency abruptly and the youth gets the feeling of being abandoned and feels as though there is no one else they can talk to? Staff turnover can be a big problem. One member of the group shared her experience with staff turnover. She stated that at one point around fifty percent of her students dropped out of her agency when they learned

Topical Lunch Groups

their primary person was no longer with the agency.

Labeling

Is there a stigma associated with the term "primary person?" Some felt that "it implies to some young people that the system is for youth who are problems… or youth who have problems."

Documentation and Evaluation

How can a primary person system be documented? Many of the members in the group were certain that they had "caring relationships" to some degree but were unaware of how to perform a self-assessment to see where they needed the most help.

III. STRATEGIES

In addition to raising these challenges of a structured primary person system, the group began discussing various strategies to draw upon and maximize the aforementioned potential benefits and to overcome the different challenges.

Compatibility

Most discussants agreed that primary person relationships should be formed based on the young person's interests. Assessing a young person's interests and needs and pairing him or her with a primary person who shares similar interests or has knowledge of the particular areas in which the young person requires some assistance can be a very helpful tool. It is always easier to build a relationship on common ground.

The resource people in the group from the various presenting agencies started to elaborate on how they designate a young person's primary person. One of the presenting agencies explained that when a young person enters the agency for the first time they are given an initial questionnaire to help the agency get a sense of that young person. The agency then waits three to four weeks before the young person is designated a primary person. This is done so that the agency can recognize the young person's passion. Then they are given a primary person according to where the young person spends the majority of his or her time. For example, if a young person frequently attends tutoring, his or her primary person might be the tutor.

Orientations

At another agency the adolescent program holds a very intensive orientation. The intake involves the young person as well as their parents. All parties—parents, youth and staff—review the program/participant contract together. At this point they inform the youth as well as the parents who their primary person will be.

Responsibility of a Primary Person

Understanding the nature of being a primary person was stated as very important—"It is about fulfilling the needs of young people." It is important to remind staff from time to time that a primary person system is supposed to serve as a support to foster the advancement of young people. It is a catalyst for staff to detect when youth are not only experiencing problems but also when they deserve acknowledgements and congratulations.

Time Factor

Another benefit mentioned was that it does not take a lot of time to build a strong relationship with youth. How the time is spent is more crucial than how much time is spent… Quality is truly more important than quantity."

Cross Communication

Creating a good system for communication flow will help a primary person system reach its highest potential. It is very important to have a formal system set up for cross communication between staff concerning youth. Having interdisciplinary meetings to give staff members an opportunity to update each other on their participants and gain assistance if necessary is extremely helpful in maintaining a primary person system. "Focus should always be communal… there are more elements involved than primary person and youth."

One agency shared how their centralized computer system works. A database was created with each participant's name and a specific tracking number that allows staff to find out who is this youth's primary person. This enables other staff members that may have to contact a young person's primary person for whatever reason to do so in a very short time.

Communication Between Supervisor and Staff

Instilling in staff that it is their responsibility to utilize the process of supervision is also very important. They should establish a strong line of communication with their supervisors, using them for everything from troubleshooting to brainstorming resources.

It was also pointed out that a primary person should always have a backup in the event youth need them and they are not available. One of the resource people in the group described their backup system: "In the event that a young person's primary person is not available, the primary person's supervisor is automatically the backup person to step in and assist the young person with whatever they may need." This system should be common knowledge to all staff and all youth.

Communication Between Staff Members

A variety of key people are important to youth at different points in their lives. Therefore, sharing and asking for assistance from other staff members when a young person does not bond with their primary person should be highly encouraged.

Supervisors Keep Close Watch

Supervisors should pay very close attention to the relationships between youth and primary persons, even if this means that they have to decrease their participant load in order better to perform this supervisory role.

Youth Input

Getting young people involved in discussing their perception of the primary person system and in defining what they feel the role of a primary person is or should be is also very helpful. It was suggested that participants should create a new name for the system if they feel there is a need for it.

Talking to young people and finding out about their feelings regarding a particular staff member leaving the agency is advised. Questioning how they feel about trying to

build a new relationship with another primary person also is highly recommended. This was acknowledged as a more effective way to help a young person adjust to the loss of their prior primary person and gain of their new one, instead of just assigning them a new primary person.

Turnover

At one agency, job developers (primary persons) perform a follow up on the progress of young people that participated in the program for up to three years. Due to the long duration of time set aside for the follow up process there is a large turnover. However, the follow up process does not stop when someone leaves the agency. Rather, the new staff person is trained and familiarized with the way things are done within their system and with each youth so that the follow up process can continue.

Agency Flexibility

Gender and racial matches were also discussed. There were different viewpoints on this subject. Everyone agreed that it is important not to do it exclusively. They also agreed on the fact that youth need practice developing skills to deal with all people. However, some still stood behind the idea that, "if it is in the best interest of the young person it should be done."

The group felt that later on in life youth will come across a professor, boss or co-worker they will not particularly care for and will not be able to switch this person to someone they feel affinity towards. Some felt the best thing to do when a young person does not like their primary person is to challenge them to try and build a relationship with them. However, others felt it is better to address the situation

from the perspective of fostering the advancement of youth. One participant described that if pairing up a "Dominican child with a Dominican primary person better develops that child… this can be instrumental in helping the young person get over any language barrier they may be experiencing." It was also said that structuring a mechanism for youth to change their primary person if it is in the best interest of the young person is a big plus.

It was agreed upon that the best way to deal with young people that have prejudices or biases is to encourage them to associate with all people. Someone said, "kids need a model; they mimic what they see. If the youth development program is multicultural, with positive relations between all cultures, kids will pick up on this and follow…. The tone has to be set by the agency in the beginning."

Civic Innovation and Implementation

The FUND FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK *is a private operating foundation launched by the Ford Foundation in 1968 with the mandate to improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers. Through its basic programs as well as centers on youth development, government performance and the Internet, the Fund introduces and helps to implement innovations in policy, programs, practice and technology in order to advance the functioning of government and nonprofit organizations in New York City and beyond. Among its many roles, the Fund acts as management consultant, computer and information technologist, program designer, translator, incubator, banker, grantmaker and non-partisan convener.*

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

Contact: **Linda Pitts**, *Director, Youth Development Institute*

The Fund's YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE (YDI) was established in 1991 to act as a leading force in New York City to base policies, programs and practices on positive models of youth development. The Institute provides technical assistance to school-community collaborations and other youth-serving organizations, and builds consensus around and disseminates best practices of effective youth work.

Beacons Technical Assistance, Beacons Nationwide Adaptation, Networks for Youth Development, BEST—Building Exemplary Systems of Training, Community Leadership Initiative, Community Youth Employment Program, and the Jericho Project—Working with Faith Communities are the various program components of which YDI is comprised.

The Youth Development framework holds that young people need five conditions for a healthy adolescence and successful adulthood: a one-to-one caring relationship with an adult, consistency and continuity in their lives, engaging activities, opportunities for contribution, and opportunities to make decisions with real consequences and being presented with high expectations.

YDI works with government, community-based organizations, and schools to adapt and apply this youth development framework to the design and implementation of programs, services, and community-wide strategies. The Youth Development Framework, promoted by YDI since its inception in 1991, has gained increasing recognition from foundations and the federal government, as well as national and local non-profit organizations.

Networks for Youth Development

Networks for Youth Development is a partnership between YDI and a network of 14 community-based youth organizations whose goals are to strengthen the field of youth services in New York City; increase opportunities for staff development; improve organizational structure; and ensure that youth development programs are designed to meet the developmental needs of youth and to build a set of core assets and competencies needed to participate successfully in adolescent and adult life.