

## Strategic Vision Panel Discussion

### Engaging Youth

December 7, 2017

**A youth (16 – 24) in *the system* shares many characteristics with all youth's with the most considerable difference being they lack support.** All youth receiving services need some help depending on the level of their crisis which varies from individual to individual. However, in many ways no different from other youth.

- They are often independent to the point of bordering on stubbornness. They can also be forgetful and seemingly unable to carry out what adults deem routine easy-to-do everyday tasks. They are also very loyal to their peers.
- Youth in the system, absent the support of a home, often find support in their peers or have what is referred to as a “street dad” or “street mom”. This relationship can be unsafe or safe. Their world has its own unique culture referred to as *Street Culture*.
- They often find it easy to converse with others in this culture but find it challenging to converse with those outside.
- They often don't have skills and the degree to which they are able to learn is not certain and again varies from one individual to the next.
- Research now shows that adolescent brains are still developing well into the 20's. This means that young adults lack many of the skills to be successful adults like impulse control, risk avoidance, critical thinking and decision making. Adults working with these youth need to take that into consideration in their expectations for and interactions with them.
- *85% of foster youth in Maine do not graduate from high school.*
- Many of the youths in service have been in and out of shelters.

**Common, seemingly small mistakes, have more severe outcomes (hard landings) for youths in service that other youths with support might not experience.** Absent critically needed support, an oversight such as forgetting to pay a phone bill can result in the loss of communication needed to stay in touch with support systems, an employer and others. The consequences can be damaging and long term.

- A mistake takes on greater consequences for these youths which is damaging in and of itself.
- Because these mistakes can have considerable consequences and as such, also deny the youth a much needed chance to fail.
- Not being able to fail results in the youths not learning to practice actions essential to fixing a problem and managing or coping with routine daily activities.

**What are the best practices to engage youth, why do they stay in a program?** Respect them and listen and don't tell them what to do. Youth's will stay in a program for a number of reasons due to both the conditions in which they live and how program staff manage the program and relate to the youth participants.

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- Program workers need to respect, listen carefully and show interest in what the youths they're working with are experiencing.
- Blending in is important. If they sit on floor those working with them should do so as well.
- Do not blame them for but rather support and encourage them.
- A good navigator is a creative problem solver who can roll with successes but shortcomings as well and be resilient. Most importantly, they show up and are perceived as reliable.
- Many youth's stay in a program because the thought of losing their housing is considerable.
- Youth also can develop a sense of comradery with their peers in programs. This contributes to their staying in the program.

**Housing needs of youth in the system.** Don't attempt to put youth's in programs modeled after programs that were developed with adults in mind.

- Youth's need extended housing programs where they can learn about and understand the structure of living in their home and practice that living. It should be an environment where they can fail without the hard landing.
- MaineHousing should examine the feasibility of:
  - Providing additional security deposit payment assistance.
  - Developing opportunity youth initiatives that align local resources to youth programs.
  - A host family/home is where the youth can live in a community where there are people with skills that will share them with the youth. Needed services are provided. Takes the youth in and essentially functions as everyday living coach.
  - Master Leasers where a partner organization is the leaser or provides services to youths in the rental unit and takes responsibility for them.
  - Find those landlords who might rent more units to youths who've completed RentSmart.