

YOUNG ADULT CAPACITY INITIATIVE  
FIVE CASE STUDIES



A report prepared by the Academy for Educational Development



FUND FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Introduction

Reconnecting Youth	1
Who Are Disconnected Youth?	1
Continuing Changes in the Job Market	2
Policy and Programming Needed	3
The Case Studies	4

## YACI at Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation

Overview of Organization and Community	9
Initial Development and Implementation	9
YDI Role	11
Changes in Organizational Capacity and Programming	14
The Experiences of Youth	20

## YACI at East Side House Settlement

Overview of Organization and Community	27
Initial Development and Implementation	28
YDI Role	29
Changes in Organizational Capacity and Programming	30
The Experiences of Youth	34

## YACI at Harlem Children's Zone

Overview of Organization and Community	41
Initial Development and Implementation	43
YDI Role	43
Changes in Organizational Capacity and Programming	45
The Experiences of Youth	46

## YACI at New Heights Neighborhood Center

Overview of Organization and Community	53
Initial Development and Implementation	53
YDI Role	55
Changes in Organizational Capacity and Programming	57
The Experiences of Youth	59

## YACI at Sesame Flyers International

Overview of Organization and Community	67
Initial Development and Implementation	68
YDI Role	69
Changes in Organizational Capacity and Programming	72
The Experiences of Youth	75

Conclusion	81
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References	82
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# INTRODUCTION

## Reconnecting Youth

The case studies in this report describe how five community-based agencies funded by the Youth Development Institute (YDI) at the Fund for the City of New York implemented programming to address the needs of their community's "disconnected" youth—individuals between the ages of 16 to 24 who are not actively attending school or working (Levitan, 2005). A growing body of literature illustrates the need to reach out to these members of society who are at risk, in the short term, of unproductive or destructive behaviors and are more likely, in the long term, to experience periods of unemployment and earn lower wages throughout their adult lives (Levitan, 2005).

## Who Are Disconnected Youth?

In the literature, successful transition to adulthood is defined as an individual's acquiring skills that bring about connection to the labor force, as well as having a positive social/interpersonal support system. Unsuccessful transitions are characterized by unemployment or marginal employment, low skill level, lack of or negative personal relationships, imprisonment, low income, and single-parent status. These characteristics are typical of youth prone to "disconnectedness" (Wald and Martinez, 2003).

## How many such youth and young adults are there?

The total number of young adults in the nation has been rising since the mid 1990s. According to Sum et al. (2002), in 2001, 15 percent of people aged 16-24 were considered "disconnected." If this trend continues, by 2010, there will be approximately 5.8 million young adults who have "fallen through the cracks" — who are out of school and out of work.

Disconnected youth have low levels of education. Based on U.S. Census 2000 data, 79 percent of disconnected youth have no postsecondary schooling and 41 percent lack a high school diploma. Disconnected youth are predominately in their twenties, and a third of the females and a small fraction of the males are parents. A very large proportion — over two-thirds — have been jobless for an extended period of time. Disconnected youth are disproportionately minority — over half of disconnected youth (51 percent) are Black or Latino, and 6 percent are Asian American (Sum et al., 2002).

Seventeen percent of out-of-school young adults ages 16-24 were foreign born as of 2002, and more than one of four out-of-school youth in the central cities were immigrants (Sum, et. al 2002). Among male immigrant dropouts, there was more employment than among their native-born counterparts, with some data suggesting that immigrant male dropouts are a preferred source of labor in some job categories and are able to access jobs in certain businesses run by immigrants

and/or family. These — and other disconnected youth — may not be officially counted as formally employed but may work “under the table” or “off the books.”

In New York City, the proportion of disconnected youth is slightly higher than nationally: in 2001-03, 16 percent of the one million youth in New York City aged 16-24 were neither in school, employed, nor seeking employment. In addition, New York City has nearly double the national percentage of disconnected males (16.2 percent in New York City versus 7.7 percent nationally (Levitan, 2005).

Furthermore, distinctions must be made between “recently” or younger disconnected youth, ages 16 to 17, and older disconnected youth, ages 18 to 24. As Wald and Martinez (2003) maintain, reconnecting young adults in this older group may be more complex — if only because they have been out of school and/or work longer. Wald and Martinez suggest the need for a “system of services for young adults (18-24 years old) experiencing substantial difficulties connecting to the labor force.”

## **Continuing Changes in the Job Market**

Much has been written for decades about the enormous changes in the labor market affecting all workers and workplaces, as well as the number and types of jobs available and the nature of work itself. These changes include the drastic decline in manufacturing jobs; the enormous growth of technology; the globalization of trade; increased “job flight” and outsourcing; the growth of the service sector and of knowledge-based industries; and the evolving nature of much work requiring what Murnane and Levy (1996) call the “soft skills.” These new basic skills include teamwork, cooperation, communication, and flexibility, as well as the ability to function in an increasingly complex workplace and within a diverse workforce. All these factors have changed the “rules governing the success for people entering the labor market” today compared with the 1960s (Bernhardt, et al., 2001) and resulted in a decrease in economic mobility, increased job instability, and an expansion of the “low-wage career trap” (Bernhardt, et al.; 2001). In addition, policies concerning minimum wages and taxation further increase the gap between the rich and the poor in society as a whole.

These changes have especially affected the work and life prospects of young people without basic — and more — skills. Increasingly, for even an entry-level job, potential employees need skills and attitudes beyond those obtained from a typical high school education in many schools across the country. Employment rates of out-of-school youth differ considerably by educational attainment, rising strongly and consistently with the level of schooling (for example, in 2001, 55 percent of young adult high school dropouts were employed versus 74 percent

of high school graduates). This statistical association holds true for every ethnic group (Sum et al., 2002).

Further, simply gaining access to a job is increasingly hard, with many entry-level jobs removed through outsourcing and no easy points of access to businesses and organizations at which “job titles have been collapsed and decision making has been pushed down to multiskilled autonomous employees working on teams” (Bernard et al, 2001). Accessing a job may be especially difficult for disconnected youth, who often have little contact with employed individuals — either in their communities, where employment options are few, or in their homes. These youth may also have attended/dropped out of/been “pushed out” of schools with no rigorous academic courses and where staff have low expectations of students. Many of these youth lack the types of connections, “know-how,” and networks that support middle class youth in finding and keeping employment and planning a career in the increasingly “untransparent” and complex labor market.

Participants in YDI's Young Adult Capacity Initiative (YACI) are in many ways typical of disconnected youth in New York City and nationwide. Many are high school dropouts and unemployed or underemployed. They are disproportionately African American and Latino, and many are foreign born. YACI participants are often male, and some of the young women participants are single parents. Many are living with their families but may have little in the way of positive adult supports. Lastly, many YACI participants attended large high schools where the work was unchallenging and not suited to their needs and where staff expectations of student achievement were low.

## **Policy and Programming Needed**

Given the high rates of disconnection cited above, there is a clear need for programs that help young adults finish their education, learn basic occupational skills, find a job, and learn the skills and attitudes necessary to keep the job. The task of reconnecting disconnected young adults to systems of support begins with raising awareness and attention to the needs of this, to-date, underserved population. It also involves recognizing that policies and programs designed for the general population of youth are often not adequate for the disconnected (Wald and Martinez, 2003). Indeed, the case studies in this report demonstrate that programs addressing the needs of disconnected youth and young adults must provide a range of support services far beyond GED classes and help with resume writing and interview skills.

## The Case Studies

The extensive needs of disconnected youth are being addressed, in varying degrees, by the five YACI programs described in this report. The first case study examines the Cypress Hills Youth LEAD Program, an initiative within the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC) in East New York, Brooklyn. CHLDC has been providing essential services to the community since 1983 but was unfamiliar with the specific issues of disconnected youth. The case study describes the development of the YACI program, from its earliest conceptualization through the implementation of a range of services for disconnected youth and the subsequent modifications (hiring a social worker and implementing a more effective record-keeping system with a focus on older youth served). From this study it is clear that organizations should remain flexible, as CHLDC did, and willing to respond to the specific needs of their participants by modifying and enhancing their services and activities.

East Side House Settlement in the Bronx is the subject of the second case study. Located in the poorest congressional district in the nation, the population it serves has high unemployment and low graduation rates. However, there are signs of rejuvenation within the area and, from the case study, it is clear that East Side House Settlement is a vital player in this effort. At this site, the emphasis of the YACI program was on relationship building with youth and retention strategies. In addition, this case study shows the vital shift in the philosophy of youth outreach from simply providing job placement services to supplementing this with services to foster the educational and developmental skills of disconnected youth to help them both obtain and keep a job.

The third case study features El Camino (the Path) — the YACI program at the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ). For over 30 years, HCZ has been dedicated to promoting youth and community development in Central Harlem, one of the most devastated communities of New York. As a result of YACI, HCZ — renowned for its work with young children and teens — now has a program serving out-of-school youth—a population not served in the past, nor considered as a target population in the HCZ mission. HCZ has supplemented the YACI funding and demonstrated considerable commitment to working with this population by supporting an on-site GED class; funding the GED teacher; providing complementary resources — transit cards, books, materials, as well as part-time jobs and internships — to program participants; and encouraging YACI participants to take part in other agency services, such as benefits screening and recreational and social activities.

Aggressive fundraising and community partnerships are emphasized in the fourth case study of New Heights Neighborhood Center (NHNC). NHNC is located in the Washington Heights/Inwood section of Manhattan, home to the

largest enclave of immigrants (predominately Dominicans) in New York City. NHNC has developed a highly cooperative arrangement with local agencies and institutions, including a large hospital, a local armory, and a citywide union, to provide internships and employment to its participants so that they gain the necessary and valuable experience required to be active members of the workforce. In addition, with YDI help, NHNC was able to develop professional materials to market the organization and make invaluable connections with funders and grant officers.

The last case study features Sesame Flyers International, a nonprofit organization operating various cultural, recreational, and educational youth development programs in and around the greater East Flatbush community of Brooklyn. Sesame Flyers was founded in 1983 by a group of Caribbean immigrants committed to offering their children a place to learn about their cultural heritage. The YACI program at Sesame Flyers, “Get R.I.C.H.” (Reaching Individuals to Change Humanity), exposes young people to an array of employment skill-building workshops, as well as one-on-one employment counseling. The initial YACI grant allowed the agency to hire extra staff to address the needs of disconnected youth, as well as to obtain additional grants to expand the agency's youth employment component.

Two YACI programs — at HCZ and Sesame Flyers — are located in Beacon centers. Beacons are community centers located in public school buildings, offering a range of activities and services to participants of all ages, before and after school, in the evenings, and on weekends. Individual Beacons are managed by community-based organizations and work collaboratively with their host schools, community advisory councils, and a wide range of neighborhood organizations and institutions. Location in a Beacon provides disconnected young adults with a great range of activities and services to foster their successful transition to employment. Funded and administered by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, the Beacons is the largest municipally funded youth initiative in the country.

The voices of YACI participants who were interviewed or who participated in focus groups are quoted throughout this report. All their names have been changed.

YACI AT CYPRESS HILLS LOCAL  
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

## Overview of Organization and Community

What strikes you when you walk into the GED classes at Cypress Hills on a week-day evening is how focused the young people are as they work quietly at tables in the classroom. Students come each evening, for three hours, to work out math and reading comprehension problems on the board and in their workbooks. Some work quietly on their own and resist when the teacher asks them to come to the board, while others feel more comfortable asking questions and showing their work to the class. The teacher walks around the room checking on the work and answering questions as the young people work independently. She gently encourages them to recall the formula for that type of problem or offers advice on how to approach the question.

This class is part of the Cypress Hills Youth LEAD (Learning, Educating others, and Achieving Dreams) program, located in the Cypress Hills section of East New York. The program sits within a larger local agency—the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC), founded in 1983. By 2006, CHLDC had grown to a yearly budget of \$5.6 million, with programming serving a wide range of ages. Programming for young adults includes services and activities at the nearby Beacon Center, the employment center, the College STEPS program, the college counseling center, ESL classes, and — since the YACI program — the Youth LEAD program (formerly known as Youth Works). For FY 2007, 23 percent of the agency budget, equaling \$1.3 million, will be earmarked for young adult programming alone.

CHLDC serves Cypress Hills, City Line, and East New York — some of the poorest neighborhoods in Brooklyn. In 2002, over 27 percent of households in these neighborhoods had an income of less than \$10,000; 71 percent of children were born into poor families, and 92 percent of public school students qualified for the free or reduced-price lunch program. The local high school, Franklin K. Lane, has extremely low graduation rates (27 percent in 2002), and 32 percent of Lane's students are overage for their grade. Furthermore, Lane's suspension rate is 107 students per 1,000 students, considerably higher than the 77 per 1,000 in similar schools in 2002.<sup>1</sup>

## Initial Development and Implementation

The CHLDC executive director described the agency's position before starting the YACI program as one of uncertainty about effectively addressing the unique needs of the disconnected young adult population:

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<sup>1</sup> CHLDC Bi-Annual Report to Youth Development Institute, December, 2003.

*I never heard of disconnected youth before YACI, and even if we had understood about the population, we wouldn't have known what we could do.*

However, after meeting with YDI representatives in 2002, CHLDC was convinced that it could serve this population and established the Youth LEAD program as part of the YACI pilot program. The executive director described being excited about serving this population and offering “more than just basketball.”

Cypress Hills received the initial YACI grant of \$60,000 from YDI in November 2002 to start the Youth Works program to serve 40 young people. The program initially had three major components: 1) a GED preparation class; 2) weekly employment workshops; and 3) social events. In 2006, the program added a job-readiness workshop. All components are supported by a case-management model and ongoing career and educational counseling is interwoven with all Youth LEAD programming.

The GED portion of the Youth LEAD program is comprised of two levels of GED preparation classes: pre-GED and GED. Both are held in the evenings Monday through Thursday at a local public middle school. In summer 2004, the agency added a summer GED class. Participants are generally 17 to 22 years old, and most have been out of school for 8 to 16 months. The classes are informally taught, with one teacher assigned to each class of approximately 15 to 20 students. The two GED teachers, who have been with the program since it began, are both community residents and are consistently referred to as the most important reason students succeed in the program. In addition to the GED classes, students participate in recreational trips, such as visiting the local library or going to films. In 2006, these trips also included visiting social service agencies, such as The Door in Manhattan, to introduce the young adults to organizations in New York City that serve a variety of social service needs that may not be addressed within the Youth LEAD program.

When a young adult enrolls, he/she meets with the Youth LEAD program director for the registration and intake process. During the intake, young adults also take a placement test for the pre-GED or GED class and/or for ESL classes. At this time, they also take a survey asking for basic demographic information and receive an orientation to the program.

Since its inception in December 2002, 430 young adults have entered the Cypress Hills Youth LEAD program, 87 have registered for the GED, 75 have taken the exam, 45 have received their GED, and 95 have obtained a job.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> CHLDC Bi-Annual Reports to Youth Development Institute: June and December 2003, June 2004; January and July 2005; January 2006.

## YDI Role

### Conceptualization

The executive director described the very early stages of thinking about creating programming for disconnected youth as a time of learning and new realizations about the capacities of CHLDC. After the initial contact with YDI, some staff began to advocate for expanded programming for young adults, while others resisted because Cypress Hills “could not fill every gap” in the neighborhood, given limited resources and other services in the community to address young adults' employment and social service needs. The executive director maintained that the YDI director educated the organization about the unmet needs of disconnected youth and young adults and convinced staff that the agency had untapped resources and in-house expertise to address these needs. Ultimately, Cypress Hills saw YACI as a good opportunity to serve young adults through a variety of programming and become part of a cohort of community-based organizations working to address the needs of this underserved population.

### Grantmaking

The initial grant from YDI created a fertile ground and a catalyst for six other grants. These included:

- \* A grant from the New York State Department of Education to start the pre-GED class to respond to the needs of the young adults the agency was newly serving.
- \* A grant from the Carpenter Union's Minority Worker Training Program that allowed CHLDC to offer vocational training to young adults who had not finished high school and were looking for careers in construction. As of March 2005, 11 students tried out for the 20-week program, and four were accepted.
- \* A grant from New York City Department of Education (DOE) to establish the Cypress Hills Educational Choice Center (CHECC), a drop-out prevention program specifically targeting young adults who have been identified as “at risk” of suspension at Franklin K. Lane High School, offering them employment counseling, internships, arts, and athletics. In 2006, CHECC was two years old, with approximately 200 students in the program. It is proof, according to the CHLDC executive director, of YDI's role in “raising the profile of disconnected youth,” which has “affected how DOE has funded alternative education.”
- \* A five-year, Out of School Time grant of \$58,000 a year, received in 2005 to fund the CHECC program that focuses on high-risk students as part of CHLDC's youth and family services.

\* A large, one-year grant of \$300,000, in 2006, from the Robin Hood Foundation. This funding allowed for a number of important programmatic changes, most notably, hiring a number of full-time staff, representing, in the words of the executive director, “a tremendous investment. It will double our capacity to serve young people.”

The initial YDI grant was important because, as the executive director put it, “We had no track record with this population [of disconnected youth].” In its recent proposals, the agency has been able to point to its YACI work with disconnected young people. As CHLDC's assistant director of youth and family services commented:

*It seems like everyone's talking about out-of-school youth now. YDI really brought this to the forefront.*

In 2006, this same staff member commented, “It's obvious we wouldn't have been ready for the Robin Hood grant without YDI.” He went on to describe the “tremendous amount of management experience” and “track record” that the agency was able to build with the YDI grant:

*We are now able to make meaningful decisions instead of theoretical ones. It permitted us to get our feet wet and learn the pitfalls and reality of the work involved. When we applied for the Robin Hood funding, we had experiences from which to draw and we knew what we were proposing was not only manageable, but we already had the infrastructure in place to move ahead with the work.*

In addition to leveraging additional grants, the initial YDI grant also served as an intra-agency catalyst. With a sharper focus on disconnected youth, the assistant director described a domino effect within CHLDC:

*YACI was the first domino in this process. Without YACI, we wouldn't have the special new component of College STEPS focusing on disconnected youth. There would be no social worker for these kids. There wouldn't be the employment piece. There might not be the GED classes. And no Minority Worker Training.*

At the end of year three of the YACI grant, the executive director reflected on the introduction of YACI into the organization as a watershed moment:

*It was like this epiphany. Taking on YACI really deepened our work, and we realized this is the way we want to move forward.*

## Other YDI Technical Assistance with Cypress Hills

YDI planned four main technical assistance goals for CHLDC for 2004-05. The first two involved facilitating the growth of internal infrastructure within the agency to address the needs of disconnected youth and building connections between the young adult programs so that participants in one program could learn of/be referred to other services available for young adults within the agency. According to the YDI 2004-05 technical assistance plan, “Young people will understand that they are part of a larger whole, including a multitude of services available to themselves and their friends and families,” and, in addition, the surrounding community will view CHLDC as a place where young adults can find age-appropriate programming. In effect, this latter goal was to foster the “brand name” of Cypress Hills as a place in the community with programs for young adults.

Another technical assistance goal was to improve practice and programming along youth development lines. To achieve this, YDI offered the Advancing Youth Development training to all CHLDC staff to foster organization-wide knowledge of youth development principles and educate agency staff about young adults in New York, the job market they face, and the tools they need to succeed in the workforce.

The final technical assistance goal for Cypress Hills was focused on data collection and management. The implementation of the newly developed METRIX data system is allowing CHLDC to manage data on large groups of participants and use it for program improvement, as well as to document the impact of YACI programming and strengthen chances of future funding:

*[YDI] has a great model. The hands-on technical assistance and the ability to call colleagues and share best practices is very useful. YDI staff will come out and hold your hand and look at the details of your program and offer advice on ways of most effectively implementing it.*

The executive director commented on another aspect of the technical assistance—that of conferring with the management of the organization about funding strategies. She also described the usefulness of having YDI introduce her to people who were knowledgeable about city, state, and federal funding, as well as the bigger picture of “where this conversation about disconnected youth is going:”

*The combination of TA and policy work has created a buzz and a synergy in New York City. It's on everyone's radar now. People are saying, “We have to do something about dropout rates,” and in the beginning, this was just not the case.*

## Challenges

The main challenge raised frequently during interviews with CHLDC staff and with YACI participants was addressing the high level of support services needed by this disconnected youth population. A number of CHLDC staff reported that they could see that they were “just scratching the surface” with the services they were able to offer. “I realized this,” the executive director reported “when I was getting weekly phone calls from the assistant director of youth and family services about another suicidal youth.” This was a stark reminder that other types of services were needed in the community. Several staff also mentioned that “young adult programs need to be better connected to one another” and that “you can't do a stand-alone program.” One staff person stated:

*This population has a whole host of needs and even if you can't address them all, you need to know about them all.*

The executive director also described learning to distinguish between what young adults said they needed — a GED and a job — and all the other services they needed, but could not or did not articulate:

*When they started the YACI program, CHLDC tried to match what youth said they wanted — to get their GED — so we started a GED program. They also said they wanted a job, so we looked at job placement. But...what they don't express are the other needs that get in their way, the abuse and depression that they have at home. This all comes to the front as you get into the work.*

## Changes in Organizational Capacity and Programming

### Changes in Organizational Capacity

The working relationship with YDI staff was mentioned by CHLDC staff as an important catalyst for change within the agency and the Youth LEAD program more specifically. The executive director offered an overall impression of the agency's working relationship with YDI when she commented:

*YDI has been very supportive and open-challenging us to answer questions like “What are we doing in the GED program?” and “What could we do better?” Throughout this process, we are forced to be more reflective about what we are doing.*

Based, in large part, on this process of reflection, CHLDC staff members cited four important changes as a result of YDI's technical assistance with Cypress Hills: hiring new staff members, implementing the METRIX system, implementing a youth employment program, and adding a case-management model to the work with disconnected youth.

### *Hiring New Staff*

In February 2006, a Youth LEAD program director was hired to oversee the GED classes, job-readiness workshops, and the evolving case-management model instituted in early 2006. In January 2006, CHLCD also hired a youth development specialist, who counsels students and conducts workshops, including a female empowerment group. The hiring of these two new full-time employees was made possible by securing additional funds. Further, in 2005, the position of the assistance director was reconceptualized to include all programs for older adolescents.

These changes were important in building a more comprehensive set of services for disconnected youth. Both these new staff serve as important role models for the young people who come to the program looking for a GED, a job, or the possibility of going to college after they finish their GED. The assistant director of youth and family services commented on the importance of staff being role models for the young adults just starting to think of themselves as more than high school dropouts and specifically mentioned the Youth LEAD program director, a young man from a nearby neighborhood, as someone with whom the young people could especially identify.

The Youth LEAD program director is in regular contact with the young people in the program and has instituted a variety of new practices aimed at increasing the level of commitment on the part of students who come daily to GED classes. For example, one of his early steps was to ask students to sign a form listing expectations, including rules about tardiness, absences, and classroom behavior.

### *The METRIX System*

A second outcome of Cypress Hills' work with YDI has been the implementation of the METRIX system, which CHLCD staff are excited about, given its potential to track participants from program to program within the agency and help them see “what's really happening” with the programs. METRIX was consistently described by staff as “a big change” and “very helpful.” The assistant director of youth and family services commented that since the College STEPS program was already using the METRIX system, there would be no conflict between data systems.

The assistant director also described wanting to more effectively track the “harder to reach kids” and thought this would happen with the increased capacity for record-keeping with the new system. Before the implementation of METRIX, Youth LEAD staff entered limited participant-related data into an Excel spreadsheet, which allowed for minimal tracking and outcome analysis. The assistant director described wanting to better understand participant needs and be able to hold staff accountable to serve everyone, not just those who bonded easily with the program. With this tracking, he thought that outreach and social services could increase when attendance dropped:

*The technology is what I find the most helpful. At a moment's notice, we'll be able to get data.*

A number of staff reported that YACI had an enormous impact on data collection throughout the agency. In fact, as of 2006, measuring outcomes has become even more important to the organization. In 2006, the executive director commented that, "The Board is about to approve a three-year plan to sustain a 'beef up' of outcomes measurement throughout the organization."

Staff are particularly interested in knowing more about job and college retention rates, benefits, and degrees received. As of 2006, staff reported that the system was slowly becoming integrated into people's daily routines; the only aspect of the system not being fully used is the report feature. One administrator commented:

*It will be easier to convince everyone of its usefulness once we can show them what can be produced in terms of monthly reports being easily generated. Case managers, for example, will be able to see who has been seen and who needs follow up.*

#### ***Implementing a Youth Employment Program***

The third outcome for the agency was the implementation of a youth employment program. This program was developed as a result of working with YDI and of the increased access to best practices through the peer exchange visits to other YACI sites with employment programs for disconnected youth. CHLDC staff have toured these other programs, including the program at the Stanley Isaacs Neighborhood Center in Manhattan, and described learning some important lessons. The executive director described the most important of these lessons:

*[We learned that] employment counseling is more about youth development than about actually getting the young people jobs.*

Since YACI, there has been an increased recognition at Cypress Hills of the importance of training young adults in the "softer skills," like negotiating a workplace, showing up on time, and interacting with a boss. The executive director stated:

*Jobs are just a small part of the equation—we are now more focused on developing employment skills and have a stronger push towards college for disconnected youth.*

In 2006, the Youth LEAD program began holding employment readiness workshops in addition to the daily GED preparation classes. The group meets two hours a week for five weeks and is led by the Youth LEAD program director. Group members work on job-access issues, such as resume writing and interviewing

skills. The group also has a social services component, which addresses obstacles that stand in the way of young people keeping a job, such as how to handle conflict in the workplace. For example, group members address questions like, “What pushes my buttons?” and practice the communication skills key to success in the workplace.

Next steps for this employment readiness component include hiring a job developer, developing a job bank, and creating an internship program where the Youth LEAD participants can use their newly acquired skills.

#### *Adding a Case-Management Component*

In 2006, case management became “the basic building block of the programming from this point on,” according to the assistant director of youth and family services. Each of the three full-time staff carries a case load of 30-35 young people. In this case-management capacity, staff follow up with students and provide ongoing and regular check-ins regarding attendance, including calling if the young person does not come to class. Staff also meet monthly with each student and assess his/her progress towards the GED or employment. The Youth LEAD program director explained:

*The idea is to make this a multiservice agency that serves young adults. Ideally I would like this to be a place where a young person could get every need addressed.*

Staff also sit down with a student and the GED teacher to review his/her academic progress, allowing the student to celebrate incremental successes. With the GED as the only marker of success, staff found that incremental signs of progress were getting lost. Staff hope to make such progress more evident in order to encourage those youth who take longer to move through the GED sequence. For example, while a student may not have progressed from the pre-GED to the GED class, he/she may have progressed from a fourth to a seventh-grade reading level. This approach, emphasizing the positive, is in accord with agency's overall approach, as the executive director explained:

*We are not a traditional social services agency. We tend not to see people as clients, we don't tend to see them in terms of psycho/social problems. We look at their strengths and in terms of their assets. In other words, we don't work from a deficit-driven model. We see young people as the drivers of their own life.*

Because there is still a limited capacity to provide one-on-one counseling for Youth LEAD participants, CHLDC has established a number of key partners in the social services field, such as The Door, as mentioned above. Staff found that referrals to young people often went unused. An alternative to simply handing out agency contact information has been visits to these agencies with the young people to introduce them to staff, as well as to the services available. The

assistant director explained that these trips also served to de-stigmatize many of the social services:

*This way, they know where to go if they need help that we can't provide. It's much better than simply handing out a number. Ideally we would do everything in-house and have therapists on site, but we just don't have the capacity for that yet. So until then, we want to make sure they know that there are places they can go.*

While the implementation of counseling in the Youth LEAD program has been essential to addressing the larger educational and employment goals of disconnected youth, the executive director commented that the counseling component of the work is difficult to secure funding for:

*It doesn't have hard outcomes that everyone's looking for. Things like trust, life skills, self-esteem, these are often "too soft" in terms of what funders are looking for. They want things like jobs, college, and graduation.*

The executive director emphasized that addressing issues like participant self-esteem are essential to increasing the "more visible outcomes." When asked how she presents this connection to potential funders, she explained that she makes the connection "really explicit and by promising the hard outcomes. We explain that we could increase success rates if we had these additional counseling resources."

### Changes in Programming

An important organizational change at Cypress Hills has been the integration of all programs serving disconnected youth and the related infusion of youth development principles into CHLDC programming. Over the course of 2005, the Youth LEAD program, including the pre-GED and GED class, employment counseling, and the Minority Workers Training Program, was embedded within a network of services aimed at young adults generally, and young adults who are out of school, more specifically. In addition to Youth LEAD, there are a number of other programs within the agency that serve young adults — the employment center, the dropout prevention program at Franklin K. Lane, and College STEPS — and, as these programs have evolved, they have been realigned more closely with one another and will now be more aligned with Youth LEAD. In effect, as mentioned above, the dropout prevention program, the Youth LEAD program, and the College STEPS program now fall under the Cypress Hills Division of Youth and Family Services and report to the assistant director, who described this integration as "representing a large commitment on the part of the agency to this population."

This integration includes some changes in how programs have operated — the biggest change being in the College STEPS program. The counselors in this program, who work with students to select schools, complete applications, apply for financial aid, and make the transition to college, typically began outreach and recruitment within the local high schools. The assistant director explained that the population and the recruitment strategies for this program have changed to include YACI participants:

*We would like this outreach to include the YACI grads with GEDs much more specifically. Up until now, the outreach has been mostly to high school graduates, and they will need to think a little differently about the students that they usually work with.*

The assistant director also described an overall need for a deeper connection between Youth LEAD and College STEPS:

*A few YACI participants use the College STEPS program, but this connection has not been as regular as we would like.*

In September 2006, the offices of Youth Lead and College STEPS will begin to share the same office space. It is hoped that this move will improve CHLDC's ability to refer young people from Youth Lead to College STEPS.

#### *Infusion of Youth Development*

Several staff described the increased infusion of youth development principles at CHLDC. According to the assistant director, youth development is now a part of all new staff trainings, and all staff development efforts are based on this perspective. In addition, youth development is a factor in hiring new staff:

*I look for people with youth development sense at a personal and deep level, people who have experience with youth leadership and think of youth in a strength-based way.*

The assistant director also described the Advancing Youth Development training conducted with all staff as having been essential for the successful integration of CHLDC's youth programming and as “really unifying the staff and getting everyone on the same page.” He emphasized the importance of regarding youth as resources:

*It's important to think about youth as resources early because when you get buy-in [for this approach], you get very different things happening at the day-to-day level. The GED teachers, for example, are much less didactic in their teaching and work to get more interaction and initiation with the students.*

In sum, this integration of the programming for young adults at CHLDC has grown organically over three years, as has the increased integration of youth development principles into all aspects of the agency. As opportunities arose, additional grants were received, staff members were trained, programming expanded, and now, according to the executive director, it “just made sense to put all of these programs together under one division.” She elaborated:

*We were already converts to youth development a long time ago. Long before YACI, we had incorporated these values into our mission and values as an organization. Investing in young people was part of everything we did. This is evident in the choices we made with YACI, like having [the program director] staff it-a young person who lives in the neighborhood and has been part of the organization most of her life. We designed classes that were fun and interactive and thought of the teacher as more of a coach who could provide love, and sometimes tough love, and finally, we sent all of our staff to YDI for training in youth development.*

## **The Experiences of Youth**

When YACI participants were interviewed in 2005 concerning their experiences with the Youth LEAD program, their future goals, and issues they face both in and out of the YACI program, they commented only on the GED classes and were less knowledgeable about other CHLDC young adult programming. This is some evidence of the time it takes for these organizational changes to make their way to the participant level.

Focus-group discussions with Youth LEAD participants highlighted both the range of educational backgrounds that the young people bring to the program and the fact that many YACI participants are immigrants. When a group of young people, ranging in ages from 17 to 23, were asked how long they had been in school, responses included:

*I would have been a senior.*

*I went to five different high schools, five tenth grades. Then took a year off.*

*I graduated from middle school, been out of school since then.*

One student who had recently immigrated to the United States had not attended any school in the U.S., but had graduated from high school in her native country. She chose to get her GED at Cypress Hills because she needed it to attend college. When asked why she had chosen Cypress Hills, she reported that other organizations had told her to get her green card first, but at Youth LEAD this had not been an issue. Two young men described working for a GED as a

requirement for joining the army, which they viewed as a way to get “out of New York and out of the neighborhood.”

#### *Andrew*

Like many disconnected youth, Andrew, a 19 year-old young man, is an immigrant who had worked for several years in a family business. From Guyana and fluent in English, Andrew came to New York City with his family when he was 15 years old. He worked for three years after arriving — not wanting to go to public school because he had heard that the education in the United States was “terrible.” He entered the GED class at 18 and passed the test two months later. At the time of his interview, Andrew was working for his uncle's import/export business, driving a truck to JFK airport, and planning to apply to CUNY to study to become a pharmacist. When asked if he planned on using the College STEPS program, Andrew said he had heard of the program but had not consulted it and was not sure if he would.

#### *Valerie*

A single parent, like many disconnected young women, Valerie took the GED a week before our interview. Valerie described her days as taking care of her two-year-old daughter, her “bipolar father,” and her 13 year-old epileptic brother. As a result, when she got pregnant, Valerie explained:

*It wasn't a big deal since I was already taking care of the family, and this way I would just take care of one of my own.*

Valerie had previously applied to an EMT program but had missed the cut-off by one point on the math entrance test and was coming to GED classes to make sure her math skills were “up to speed.” She attended Ida B. Wells High School after she became pregnant, but was required to do what she considered an inappropriate amount of school work, and, as a result, when she turned 16 (in the middle of grade 10), she dropped out. Her daughter was an infant at that point. Valerie took several months off from school and started GED classes at Grover Cleveland High School, but after about one and a half years, these classes were cancelled. After a neighbor told her about the program, Valerie came to Cypress Hills, where she said she “wouldn't change anything.” Valerie comes to class three days a week because she visits her incarcerated boyfriend on the fourth day — which she explained to the program director before enrolling. After obtaining her GED, Valerie intends to take EMT, for which her mother has agreed to pay the \$600 fee, and then go to college.

Valerie said she liked coming to class because it was a chance to “get out of the house and be quiet for a while.” She also commented, like many YACI participants, on the “safety” she experienced in the program:

*The building and the program feel safe. I wouldn't go if it didn't feel safe.*

In interviews with youth, one particular theme emerged — how much participants liked and appreciated the GED teacher. This teacher's attachment to the students and personal demeanor were often what youth described as a major strength of the program. In one case, the attachment one student felt to this teacher prompted him to volunteer in the class after receiving his GED to help other students learn math. In the classroom, this teacher was very warm and receptive to all questions and was not intimidating for students who were struggling to master new skills. Indeed, the quality most mentioned of this teacher was her “mothering.” The classroom activities she conducted were both structured and unstructured and created an overall "safe" atmosphere for students to engage in learning. The class atmosphere was also casual—students were free to come and go without asking permission.

What is evident from these interviews is the commitment of YACI participants to the program. One can only expect that this commitment will grow as participants have even more opportunities to interact with additional services at CHLDC, with the ongoing and planned integration of services across the agency.

# YACI AT EAST SIDE HOUSE SETTLEMENT

## Overview of Organization and Community

Upon entering East Side House Settlement one is pleasantly greeted at the front desk, usually by a young person who is in training for office work. While waiting, one can hear the familiar hustle and bustle of a community center: young people chatting as they wait to enter a classroom, the teacher shouting last-minute reminders to the group of students leaving, and those students conferring on how to complete the day's assignment. As one group of youth exit the building, they call out and encourage one another to come back the next day, while the other youth walk in, take their seats, and await the teacher's instructions. This is YACI in action at East Side House Settlement.

East Side House Settlement was founded in 1891 as a resource and center of hope for newly arrived immigrants. Today, East Side House Settlement continues its mission of providing hope to the community of Mott Haven. A multiservice agency, they provide a myriad of programs, such as early childhood services, afterschool activities, youth programs, counseling, and family services for community residents. It works to address four critical obstacles facing community members: oppressive poverty, crime and violence, a failing school system, and an undereducated, under-trained work force.<sup>3</sup>

In 1984, East Side House Settlement established the adult education program to provide adult basic education and career guidance to youth and young adults, ages 16 and above. Recently, they merged the adult education program with the technology program to create the Community Technology and Adult Education Program, which became the focus of East Side House Settlement's participation in YACI. The deputy director of education and development who is the staff person supervising YACI described how this initiative is aligned with their mission:

*This agency has a long history of supporting students to improve their economic status. That's why we provide technology and career-readiness training. YACI is an enhancement and extension of the work we already do.*

East Side House Settlement is located in the Mott Haven community of the Bronx, the poorest Congressional district in the nation.<sup>4</sup> Unemployment in this community is severe, hovering close to 24 percent for females and males 16 years and older. Limited school attainment is also an issue, with over 55 percent of the community's adult population lacking a high school diploma.<sup>5</sup> East Side House Settlement is surrounded by a mixture of public housing complexes and attached brick houses that have fallen into disrepair. There is a large police

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<sup>3</sup> East Side House Settlement Biannual Report to Youth Development Institute, August 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> New York City Department of City Planning, Bronx Community | Profile, 2002.

precinct in the immediate vicinity. However, there are signs of neighborhood revitalization — dilapidated row houses with “For Sale” signs are located on blocks with beautifully restored townhouses. Another sign of rejuvenation is the current renovation of the neighborhood's public library.

## **Initial Development and Implementation**

In the first year of YACI, East Side House Settlement worked on restructuring to strengthen the Community Technology and Adult Education Program. This restructuring brought an experienced deputy director to supervise YACI. Additionally, East Side House Settlement renovated and moved into a new and larger space that provided participants access to an updated technology lab. This move allowed for more appropriate classroom space for the GED classes and better access to the computer technology center. Following this move, participants were able to complete a seven-week computer training course, in addition to their GED course. The computer course includes basic computer skills, such as using Microsoft Word, Excel, and the internet. The computer technology department has become an official testing site for Microsoft certification and in July 2005 began offering classes in Microsoft applications to prepare students for the certification tests. This course is available to the public for a fee but is free for YACI participants.<sup>6</sup>

Programming also includes a job-readiness component, including workshops on such topics as how to dress for an interview, time management, resume writing, and interview skills. Lastly, programming includes advisory groups, with 12-18 students and an advisor trained in goal-setting techniques, which meet to discuss participants' goals or other issues of concern. At these meetings, participants take the lead in making telephone calls to absent groupmembers to encourage their attendance.

As of March 2005, 137 young adults have been through the YACI program, and 19 of the 29 participants who took the GED passed. Further, in the past six months, through the new employment program, 10 participants were interviewed for employment and eight received jobs.<sup>7</sup>

During the latter half of 2005, YACI at East Side served a total of 125 out-of-school youth, with all 125 entering some type of educational program (GED, literacy, ESL,); 25 participants obtained jobs, and 18 passed the GED test.

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<sup>6</sup> East Side House Settlement Biannual Report to Youth Development Institute, Winter-Summer 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## YDI Role

### Conceptualization

One of East Side's goals for the first year of YACI was to build an employment component specifically for young adults. YDI assisted their staff in developing an employment curriculum; YDI also provided training on Career Zone, a career information website. In addition, East Side staff attended YDI's employment workshop series. The YACI program director, who was fairly new to the position when interviewed, indicated that the combination of their pre-existing career training materials, YDI's technical assistance, and the peer exchanges — visits to other YACI sites — gave him ample examples for his training work:

*[I have received] some great ideas on job readiness and gathered enough material to run a series of 10-12 job readiness workshops. I have materials on communication, which is a big barrier for some of our young people. I have information on conflict resolution, another huge topic for our participations. I even have a sheet on 150 ways to keep your job.*

### Grantmaking

The YACI initiative and its emphasis on outcomes have supported the agency's efforts to raise foundation or corporation funds for the Adult Education Services Program. For example, East Side House Settlement was able to leverage the YDI grant to secure a grant of \$187,500 in 2006 from the Robin Hood Foundation to provide GED preparation classes, job placement, and retention services. The agency also received \$70,000 over two years (2005-07) to be a part of YDI's new initiative for young adults — Community Education Pathways to Success (described later in this case study) — to implement an integrated literacy and youth development model for pre-GED students.

### Other YDI Technical Assistance Strategies with East Side House Settlement

YDI assisted East Side in using data to seek additional funding as well as to increase the effectiveness of its service to the young adult population. YDI staff also helped East Side develop a database — advising on data fields and using data to inform decisions and helping to develop data questions. East Side also participated in the development of the METRIX database.

YDI has also been working with East Side staff to improve communication across programs within the agency. YDI's emphasis on a comprehensive approach to youth development has supported their development of additional program supports, particularly its Family Services Program, which has provided counseling and case-management services to youth participants. The Adult Education Services program has also deepened its work with another new East Side House Settlement program initiative, the Career Internship Program, which has provided internship opportunities for several YACI participants.

## Challenges

According to the deputy director for education and development, the major challenge in implementing YACI was “putting in the structures necessary to run the YACI program” and providing the supports to help students succeed in the program. As at Cypress Hills, the deputy director maintained that this entailed understanding and providing the intensive supports that disconnected young adults need — beyond what they often say they need:

*The participants come in saying they need a GED, but they need so much more than that. Our challenge is what do we need to know that lets us know our program works? That's where YDI has been instrumental to us — the workshops, trainings, youth development — all of that helps us.*

Staff retention is a major challenge that has impacted the agency's achieving its initial benchmarks. For example, the program directorship turned over twice and was vacant for several months. To address this issue, the agency, with YDI assistance, clarified the job description for the program director position. The agency also restructured the program liaison position and developed a job description for a director of the job-readiness component, to be shared with the Career Internship Program.

In addition, YACI at East Side has successfully addressed the staff-retention challenge. Specifically, the current YACI program director was hired in early 2005 and hired the program liaison. The YACI program director has motivated staff to grow professionally and made it a point for himself and his staff to attend numerous YDI trainings, as described below.

## Changes in Organizational Capacity and Programming

### Changes in Organizational Capacity

YDI's technical assistance has spurred change and growth in East Side's organizational capacity. As the deputy director put it:

*After every YDI meeting I've attended or my staff has attended we come back with a better understanding, more knowledge, and excited about our work. YDI has given us the theory and helps us apply it.*

Specifically, there are three areas in which YDI's technical assistance has made an impact on their capacity to serve this disconnected population: a strengthened commitment to serve young adults, participant retention, and professional development of staff.

### *A Continued Commitment to Young Adults*

With YDI's assistance, East Side expanded its data collection on the participation and outcomes of the young adults served. This data has been shared with the East Side board of directors, and the board's commitment to the YACI program has remained, especially given the program's educational and youth development focus, which is in line with the agency's mission. The deputy director explained:

*It's not that we aren't going to help these young people find jobs, but these young people need to be developed further in order to go out there and get and keep that job.*

Through this expansion of data collection, in the latter half of 2005, East Side determined that over 40 YACI participants had received additional support from within the organization in the following areas: counseling, parenting skills, and emergency funds — evidence that over 30 percent of the participants needed additional supportive services in order to remain in the program.

### *Participant Retention*

YDI encouraged and supported East Side in putting in place strategies to retain YACI participants and optimize their success in the program. For example, they changed its orientation process. Previously, potential students were tested on the first day and had to begin the program immediately. Presently, the orientation involves a multistep process, involving individual screening, group orientation, and giving participants a date to return for testing, to help engage them and increase their level of commitment and readiness for the program. A newly developed intake/application form guides each prospective student through goal setting. In addition, the agency has invested in up-to-date testing materials —specifically the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) locator test — which enables staff to administer the appropriate TABE test and thus provide a positive testing experience for young people who may become easily discouraged if given a test far above their present skill level.<sup>8</sup>

During this redesigned orientation process, participants are encouraged to discuss their educational and career goals — to start them off on a positive note and ensure that they can “chart their way to success in the program.”<sup>9</sup> Participants are asked to identify the barriers that may keep them from coming to the program to help them become proactive in seeking solutions to problems before their education is interrupted yet again. In addition, participants are no longer required to begin the program immediately following testing — they can choose, from a number of options, when they think is the best time to start. This

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<sup>8</sup> East Side House Settlement Biannual Report to Youth Development Institute, Summer 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

new process, in effect, helps create a cohort of participants who go through the program together.

Other retention strategies have included an “aggressive campaign of telephone calls and letter writing to keep contact with students who were missing classes.”<sup>10</sup> Student accountability has been strengthened by enforcing attendance requirements and requiring students to call in cases of lateness or absence. These calls allowed the program director to “offer one-on-one counseling to students who were navigating through difficulties in their lives” and make referrals to the Family Services Program for continued support and counseling.

East Side House Settlement was selected by YDI to be a part of its new initiative — Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS). This citywide initiative seeks to improve the quality, scale and sustained systemic support for community-based educational service to youth who have dropped out of school and read at low levels. CEPS is a collaborative program of YDI and America’s Choice, which provides the core literacy curriculum. The program focuses its efforts on young people returning to their education, helping them improve their literacy and math skills and attain a GED or high school diploma and assisting them in entering and succeeding in college. The project will provide training, curricula, technical assistance, and sharing of practices among community-based organizations. The YACI program director indicated that this program would especially help retain those participants reading significantly below gradelevel but hoping to obtain a GED in a few months, who, not surprisingly, are among the participants who tend to drop out of the program.

As it did last year, in spring 2006, East Side held a Community Celebration Day, which participants planned, with youth singing and reading poetry and personal essays, and staff recognizing and celebrating student achievements.

#### *Professional Development of Staff*

The current program director has actively fostered the professional development of his staff — and himself. He attended the YACI network meetings and participated in the peer exchanges. He described the exposure to YDI trainings as enlightening and presented in such a way that he could readily convey the message to his staff:

*I find going to YDI inspirational. I always walk away with so many ideas. I come back to the staff and give them concrete examples of things we are going to start doing and why.*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Specifically, the program director noted the emphasis in the trainings on resiliency and the active involvement of youth in making and implementing decisions as important to the development of YACI. The program director also mentioned the importance of the forums on disconnected youth:

*It helped staff obtain a basic understanding of what the youth we are trying to serve are experiencing. It helped our staff focus on the needs and difficulties that our students face.*

In 2006, the YACI program director wanted to promote a greater, more in-depth understanding of youth development among YACI staff — to move from “youth development 101” to “youth development 202.” The program director also wanted youth development principles integrated throughout the program:

*I didn't want my staff to think of youth development as an appendix. I want them to think of it as the core, the focus of what we do.*

In order to achieve this, the program director led by example and, along with the staff, attended a series of six workshops at YDI:

*It was six workshops. My staff went on Saturdays, on holidays. My staff's attendance was 100%!*

### Changes in Programming

Given this attendance on the part of YACI staff at YDI workshops, it is not surprising that youth development practices are found throughout the YACI program at East Side. In addition to the new, more appropriate orientation procedures described above, program staff (director, student liaison, and teachers) are positive, welcoming, and respectful. Throughout program observations, it was evident that staff know how to communicate with young adults — when to be firm and when to be “approachable.” Staff present rules and a code of behavior in a respectful manner that projects high expectations rather than retaliatory actions. Although the program’s rules are set, the staff is also flexible, recognizing that young adults have many responsibilities and concerns.

For example, one program rule is that cell phones be turned off while in class. However one participant, with a young child with chronic asthma who needed to have the phone on in case of emergency, stated that staff understood this concern and allowed her to have the phone on vibrate mode. This example is typical of the way staff help participants succeed in the program.

#### *A Focus on “Connectedness”*

When asked about some lessons learned working with YACI, the East Side deputy director described a key element of youth development:

*What YACI has done is re-emphasized how critical the personal relationship is to helping young adults become successful.*

The deputy director has infused this lesson into the YACI program and communicated it to its staff. Hence, staff consistently use language to praise, reinforce, and support participants. Typical comments include:

*If you have a problem, don't worry. We will work with you.*

*Don't sell yourself short. We believe in you.*

*We won't quit on you.*

The YACI program director especially emphasized the importance of a sense of “connectedness” on the part of youth:

*You could have great academics, have great facilities, but you need staff that can connect with young people. There must be staff that young people feel they can talk to. We've put in a lot of work to help the participants feel “these people really care about me.” It's building these relationships that have made the difference for us.*

Interviews with participants reveal that the young adults have indeed formed close, bonding relationships with the staff and view staff as a motivating force in their lives:

*The teachers here motivate me. I feel happy because I understand the work here.*

*The teachers give you examples so you can understand.*

*Since I've been coming here, I've become motivated. Now, I don't miss a day.*

*All the people here are good. They care and they motivate you.*

Staff also worked on helping foster group cohesiveness and encouraging the young adults to help each other by creating advisory groups. These began in February 2005, with groups of 12-18 students and an advisor trained in goal-setting techniques meeting monthly to discuss their goals or raise other issues of concern. Then the program was modified to have participants meet twice a month in smaller groups for more personal attention, monitoring, and participation.

## **The Experiences of Youth**

Focus groups with YACI participants in spring 2006 revealed that participants experience support, motivation, and encouragement from YACI staff and that the

YACI program director and program liaison have made a concerted effort to build an atmosphere of safety and respect in the program:

*From day one, at orientation, we tell them we run this program like a business. This is not high school. There are no hoodlums, no hoodlum-like behavior here. Teachers reinforce this everyday.*

In focus-groups, YACI participants indicated that this message was not lost on them and, in fact, participants viewed this as one of the most important messages they receive from East Side. The message has helped participants become focused on their school work and develop a genuine respect and appreciation for the commitment of the YACI staff at East Side. Typical comments included:

*High school is about fun, but this program is about business and, if you are in this program, it's because you are serious about getting an education.*

*I sometimes get home late after partying with friends but I still push myself to come to the program because it's about business and respect. This is a good place, and I respect what they are doing.*

*They really focus here on getting rid of that high school attitude. It's time to stop slacking off and do what I need to do.*

Furthermore, focus-group discussions with YACI participants at East Side mirror what has been found at other YACI sites — that participants feel safe because they are welcome, accepted, and not judged:

*There are no other kids to bring you down.*

*No one is gonna make fun of you.*

*We're all here for the same thing. How are you going to look making fun of someone when you're here for the same reason?*

## **A Place for Second Chances**

The phrase that comes to mind to best describe the YACI program at East Side is “a place for second chances.” In focus groups, the young adults described school experiences that were overwhelmingly negative. They associated their school life with failure and described a lifetime of struggling with reading.

The stories of these young adults, as well as the data from AED's Youth Survey (only 26 percent of YACI participants at East Side had completed grade 11, while 34 percent had completed grade 10), reveal that YACI at East Side works with young people who have “fallen through the cracks,” and now, through YACI, are seeking to improve their educational and career opportunities, and thus their lives and often the lives of their children. Not surprisingly, the personal accounts

of these individual young adults reflect the long standing practice of schools to “push out” struggling students.

#### *Nicole*

*I went to high school for three years and had zero credits.*

Nicole, an 18-year-old African American, had attended a vocational high school for three years, yet as she put it, “I went there for three years but on paper I was still in the ninth grade.” Initially, Nicole went to the guidance counselor asking to be transferred to another high school, but the guidance counselor suggested “it'd be better to get a GED.” Thus Nicole became one of the multitudes of “unwanted” students routinely pushed out of New York City high schools.

Nicole found out about East Side through a friend and had been at East Side for five months at the time of her interview. She attended the GED classes as well as the computer training course. Asked if this program had helped her take steps to finish school, Nicole replied very strongly in the affirmative:

*Yes, the work I was doing in high school was very confusing. In high school I didn't understand algebra. Here I understand because the teacher breaks down the problem.... I come here because the people here give me hope.*

#### *Victor*

*I was suspended for a year, for fighting.*

When he was 16, Victor, a Latino, was suspended for an entire school year for fighting. When he returned to school a year later, he was told “no high school will accept you,” and given a list of GED sites. East Side was on the list; Victor called and had been attending the GED class for six months when interviewed. Now 18 and a father, Victor had learned from his year-long suspension:

*I lost a year, but now I'm set in my path. I'm getting my GED and that will open doors. I want to go to trade school.*

Victor stated that he attended East Side faithfully because the staff welcomed him:

*I have no job, no money, I've walked three miles to get here, but I get here because no school would take me. This place accepted me. This is my future and my son's future.*

#### *Dalia*

*Public assistance wanted me to work for my check. I wanted to finish my education. What kind of job am I going to get with no high school diploma?*

Like many disconnected young woman, Dalia, a Latina, is a single mother. She left school in grade 10 — no one bothered to call or find out why she just stopped going to school. When she did find work, Dalia worked odd jobs until her high-

risk pregnancy prevented her from working. At 20, Dalia was being pressured by social services to find a job to work for her public assistance check. Dalia realized that if she did not upgrade her skills and her education, she would be caught in an unending cycle of dead-end jobs. East Side came to her rescue:

*It took a lot of maneuvering but East Side fought for me to get an education. I'm in the GED class and I take the computer training, and I take an extra math class because I'm not too good in math.*

At the end of the interview, Dalia was asked how coming to East Side had affected her, and she responded:

*I've gotten my education back. My vocabulary has changed. I've definitely become more responsible. I even bought an alarm clock. I'm on the ball now!*

Individually these are snapshots of the young adults participating in the YACI program at East Side, but collectively they represent the most vulnerable, most disenfranchised sector of young people in New York City. However, these same young adults are now motivated to come to the program, and they are reading:

*I read now. Before I thought books were boring.*

*I read now more, too. I read whatever I can find in my house.*

Just as important, and for the first time, they view completing an educational program as a reality. Although participants recognize that they have a way to go to improve their education and employment prospects, it is the renewed hope that East Side has given them that keeps these young adults coming to the program, as these quotes illustrate:

*I am almost halfway there and, knowing that, has really motivated me to continue and finish.*

*I see how much I have to push myself because the work is getting harder. I am currently reading three books.*

*Even though I have to take a train and a bus to get to the program, I am still motivated to come.*

*I know at this moment in time I'm not ready to get that job because I still act ghetto, but when I'm ready I know what I have to do to get that job.*

Driven by the overall mission of YACI and supported by YDI, East Side House Settlement has provided these young adults with the fundamentals to turn their lives around. First they were welcomed, second, they became actively involved in their transformation and development, and third, they now have hope.

YACI AT HARLEM  
CHILDREN'S ZONE

## Overview of Organization and Community

El Camino (the Path) — the YACI program at the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) — comes to life in the evening when young adults flock to the GED class, many after a day of caring for grandparents, younger siblings, or their own children. The young adults are a diverse group — of different ages, educational levels, and experiences. Some are from challenging backgrounds, such as residential placements and difficult, often failing, school experiences, but they all come together in one room to work energetically towards one objective: obtaining a GED. This objective is central to YACI at HCZ.

The overall goal of El Camino is to improve the employability of out-of-school youth, ages 16 to 24, in Central Harlem. HCZ, one of the largest employers of youth in the area, requires that employees have either graduated from high school or currently be in school.<sup>11</sup> As the academic advisor of the YACI program at HCZ stated:

*The youth with the least employability skills know they need that GED just to open doors.*

The academic advisor also reinforced how limiting it is for this population when they do not have a diploma or GED:

*Specifically we see with our own staff, most who are from this community, they want to apply for a better job with the city but they don't have the academic credentials. It's the same with their relatives who are young adults and out of school. They don't get hired. We see with some of our Beacon kids who drop out of school and then two years later come back to us trying to get a job.*

By providing this in-house GED class with supportive services, HCZ is on its way to fulfilling its YACI mission — to provide these young adults “with the resources necessary to make a successful transition to an independent and healthy adulthood.”<sup>12</sup> The director of the HCZ Beacon, who is in charge of overseeing the YACI program, described the YACI mission as closely related to the overall HCZ mission to improve the lives of children and families:

*Working with these young adults and getting them into a GED program with support services is a step towards our agencywide goal.*

Formerly known as the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families, for over 30 years, HCZ has worked to improve the lives of youth and families in Central Harlem, a community deeply affected by poverty and its corresponding social ills

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<sup>11</sup> Harlem Children's Zone YACI proposal to YDI, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

— poor housing, failing educational institutions, inadequate health care, domestic violence, and child abuse — all of which have a demonstrated harmful impact on the healthy development of its youth and jeopardize the safety of the community and its institutions. The poverty rate in Central Harlem is 37 percent — more than three times the national average of 11 percent. Central Harlem's unemployment rate (18 percent) is close to double the city's rate (10 percent) and more than quadruple the national rate (4 percent). Of the adult population older than 25, only 34 percent are high school graduates and less than 15 percent are college graduates.<sup>13</sup>

HCZ now includes 16 community centers serving 14,000 children and adults through 16 different programs. HCZ and its staff of 450 have gained recognition as one of the country's "most effective and innovative community-building and youth development organizations."<sup>14</sup> HCZ operates two Beacon centers with funding from the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development.<sup>15</sup> The centers include Countee Cullen Community Center and the Booker T. Washington Center. The HCZ Beacon centers provide a range of services and activities for young people between the ages of five and 21 and their families. The centers are open weekdays, year round from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. and Saturdays from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. and are considered a national model for neighborhood-based comprehensive youth and community development programming in a safe and supportive atmosphere.<sup>16</sup> El Camino, is located at the Booker T. Washington Center 54 Beacon.

However, while HCZ has been very successful in providing high-quality programming for in-school Central Harlem youth, before YACI, it did not have a program dedicated to reconnecting out-of-school youth with the supportive services needed for a productive adulthood:

*The need for such a program is overwhelming in our community, as we witness time and again that young residents who lack education and positive work experiences face dire employment prospects and uncertain futures.<sup>17</sup>*

It is from within this context that El Camino, the YACI program at Harlem Children's Zone was developed.

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<sup>13</sup> HCZ YACI proposal to YDI, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Harlem Children Zone: "Building Stronger Communities to Support Healthier Families." Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (no date; <http://www.emcf.org/programs/youth/hcz.htm>).

<sup>15</sup> Funded and administered by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), the Beacons are school-based community centers, offering a range of activities and services to participants of all ages, before and after school, in the evenings, and on weekends. (See second-last paragraph, p. 4.)

<sup>16</sup> HCZ YACI proposal to YDI, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## Initial Development and Implementation

Initially, El Camino was designed as a case-management model through which young adults would be engaged, assessed, and linked with appropriate services. In its first year, much effort was put into community outreach and building and sustaining contact with participants. The academic advisor spent much time assessing participants to gather both their school and work history, as well as to develop the essential “relationship of trust”:

*Once that relationship has been established, then I can guide the young people through the options they have, but they have to trust first or they won't put any weight on what I say.*

While the one-on-one relationship between participants and the academic advisor was a strong aspect of the YACI program, once participants were referred to an off-site GED program, it was difficult to maintain ongoing contact with them. Thus a major change to the initial design was made, and El Camino, hired a teacher to provide an on-site GED prep program, beginning in summer 2004, with classes offered three evenings a week.

In the current model, participants are screened to determine their educational level, as well as for eligibility for entitlement benefits. They also meet with an academic advisor for goal setting and are encouraged to attend career-readiness workshops. In order not to turn away any participant, the GED class functions on an open-enrollment cycle: participants come in, take a diagnostic exam, and are then grouped in the GED class according to skill level.

Since November 2003, a total of 93 young adults have been served by HCZ's YACI program. From January to June 2005, an additional 14 out-of-school young adults registered with the program. Through June 2005, 23 participants received GED preparation at El Camino's on-site GED program.<sup>18</sup>

## YDI Role

### Conceptualization

Since working with this population is a new venture for HCZ, where YDI has been most helpful, according to the Beacon director is in “bridging how working with this population fits into the organization’s mission.” He emphasized the importance of what he called “YDI’s science” — its youth development principles. Staff were instinctively following youth development principles, the director maintained, but YDI provided a framework from which to

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<sup>18</sup> HCZ YACI report YDI, July 2005.

conceptualize the program as a whole, to ensure that all staff are “talking the same language.” The Beacon director stated:

*What YDI has done is named what we do, and now I can sit down with all the staff and go through each principle — let's take safety — and ask how we are going to make sure every participant feels safe. Now we are all on the same page.*

## Grantmaking

In terms of grantmaking, the Beacon director maintained that this new youth development philosophy has helped him advocate to the development office to ensure that El Camino is sustained and reshaped as necessary to meet the needs of participants. As proof that HCZ has “bought into working with this population,” the director cited its financial support of all his recommendations to improve El Camino's functioning:

*I advocated for an on-site GED class, I got it. I asked for a GED teacher. The organization is paying her salary. I asked for money to cover some of our wrap-around services. I got it.*

## Other YDI Technical Assistance Strategies with HCZ

Beyond helping HCZ institutionalize programming for a previously unserved population, YDI has been providing HCZ with technical assistance in two primary areas: GED programming and improving database information. Since shifting the GED on site, El Camino has been seeking ways to improve its program design. Specifically, YDI helped HCZ develop the GED curriculum and provided youth development training for instructors. YDI also helped HCZ staff think beyond the GED to addressing the population's overwhelming need for jobs (as described below). Additionally, HCZ staff participated in peer exchanges with other YACI sites that had implemented a GED model. Lastly, YDI provided HCZ with training on different database programs and sent a memo with recommended strategies for data collection.

## Challenges

Although the GED program at HCZ increased opportunities for more time and contact with each young person, the on-site GED program was not a panacea in terms of addressing the needs of disconnected youth in the area. Since all participants had been out of school for a while, it is not surprising that many had problems attending the GED program regularly. The program staff initiated some strategies to help improve attendance. As soon as a participant is absent, the academic advisor calls home to find out why he/she did not attend class. Not

having money to travel appeared to be a problem for some participants, and presently transit cards are made available to participants who need them. And, given that the number one reason for not attending the GED class is the “need to get a job,” another attendance incentive is a paid internship in the larger agency for participants who attend the GED class for 90 days consecutively.

In addition, the GED program open-enrollment policy makes it quite difficult for the teacher to remain on course with lesson planning. New students enroll and then need to catch up on missed work. Additionally, because there are students of varying skill levels in the class, it is hard for students to progress rapidly. These issues have been discussed by the staff, and one strategy to be put in place for fall 2006 is to hire classroom tutors to help students improve their skills at a faster pace.

## **Changes in Organizational Capacity and Programming**

### **Changes in Organizational Capacity**

As a result of YACI, HCZ, an organization renowned for its work with young children and teens, now has a program serving out-of-school youth — a population not served in the past, nor considered as a target population in the HCZ mission. As cited above, HCZ has supplemented the YACI funding and support and demonstrated considerable commitment to working with this population by supporting an on-site GED class, funding the GED teacher, providing resources — transit cards, books, materials, as well as part-time jobs and internships — to program participants, and enabling YACI participants to take part in other agency services, such as benefits screening and recreational and social activities. In addition, since the Beacon director and the academic advisor participate in the YACI network, they have benefited from the shared experiences of other YACI sites and been able to assess and make improvements to El Camino. The academic advisor described the usefulness of this networking:

*I get to talk to the other sites and see they have the same issues we have, and someone else says this is what we did, and I realize we can implement that too. So I realize there are solutions out there.*

One initiative arising directly from working with this population is trying to address young adults' overwhelming need for jobs. The Beacon director is working with the organization's development office to fund a project where the GED participants will be hired by the agency to work in the security or childcare fields as long as they continue to attend their GED class. This project is further evidence of the commitment that HCZ has made to working with disconnected youth and young adults.

## Changes in Programming

After only four months, the Beacon director and the academic advisor identified two major problem areas: 1) an off-site GED program was not working and 2) their original projected outcomes for the YACI program were entirely unrealistic and did not reflect the reality of what it means to work with this population. Therefore, steps were taken to address these two concerns. First, HCZ revised its design and hired a teacher to provide an on-site GED prep program (as described above). Second, HCZ modified its outcomes to better reflect what can be accomplished working with this population within a realistic time-frame. The chart below presents the new outcomes, the rationale, and program outcomes six months later.

New Outcome	Rationale	Outcome Six Months
95 percent of participants will either be referred to a GED program or reinstated into high school.	Given the enormous waiting time for being tested and then waiting for results, (90-120 days), it is more realistic to expect that participants will be referred rather than actually getting a GED or diploma.	100 percent had been referred to El Camino's on site GED program or reinstated in high school.
70 percent of referred participants will take a diagnostic exam within one year of referral..	Again, this is a more realistic time-frame.	100 percent have taken a diagnostic exam at El Camino's on-site GED program
50 percent of eligible participants will enroll in a GED program.	This accounts for those participants who drop out because they get jobs or do not want to wait to be assigned a GED class.	70 percent are attending El Camino's on-site GED program on a regular basis.

## The Experiences of Youth

In focus groups, YACI participants at HCZ described the trouble and alienation that led them to drop out of school, but at YACI they are enthusiastic and motivated. What is the difference? Focus groups with the young people indicate two major reasons for their enthusiasm: El Camino is safe, and the program makes them feel a sense of accomplishment.

### El Camino is a Safe Place

The environment created by the El Camino GED program staff — the Beacon director, the academic advisor, the GED teacher and the security staff — makes these young adults feel safe and accepted for who they are. As the participants indicated in focus groups they are “tired of living a life without an education, tired of feeling like failures, like having accomplished nothing.” In this environment young people are made to feel welcome and accepted, no matter their background, their family history, or their educational experiences. Although

students are grouped, they are grouped according to the skills they need most to develop, and there is no value placed on those groupings. There are no A, B or C students. As one of the participants put it:

*We are in here for the same reason, to get our GED. We're all in this together.*

A classroom aura of tolerance and respect has been created that enhances the participants' sense of acceptance and safety:

*Here no one judges you.*

*No one laughs at you because you can't do something.*

*If you make a mistake, nobody's going to jump on you or make fun like in high school.*

The Beacon director has made it a priority for himself, the academic advisor, and teacher to work together and build a strong camaraderie:

*I want the participants to feel they can come to any one of us for whatever they need. We work as a team, and we will help them find answers.*

While the Beacon director described his staff as professional and dedicated, he echoed other YACI program directors in maintaining that providing a GED program is not enough to recruit and retain disconnected youth:

*I know I have a very good GED teacher but having a good teacher without having services is not going to bring you success. What will bring you success is having a good teacher with wrap-around services. This population is usually in crisis and is in need of a lot of social services. You need resources, money for books, transportation, some one to make referrals, and access to support services.*

The academic advisor agreed:

*I spend most of my time telling participants “I’m here for you. How can I help you? What is it that you need?”*

The academic advisor emphasized that “it’s those little things” — the phone calls, helping with referrals, helping with jobs, and “the being present” — that keep the young adults coming to the program.

## **A Sense of Accomplishment**

At El Camino, participants — almost all of whom have experienced failure during their school years — experience a sense of accomplishment. For some, just getting to class is a challenge because they have family or economic pressures, but nevertheless they make it to the class because they are focused on getting a GED:

*Sometimes I argue with my grandmother. She gets mad that I have to come to school and can't stay with her all the time. But I come anyway.*

*It can be stressful, because I don't have any money, but I don't let it get in the way of getting my education.*

The class is grouped according to the skills that students need to develop — for example, reading or mathematics. The teacher walks around the room to help students and give them immediate feedback on their work. Students also take practice tests to determine their progress. Students know their problem areas, and the teacher provides constant reinforcement and drilling to ease students' anxieties and help them work in these areas:

*The teacher asked me what I needed help in and I said math. She made it easy for me to understand.*

*The teacher is always willing to work with me. The class could be over and she still will work with me till I get it.*

*I'm really bad in social studies, and she helps me to understand it better and reminds me to keep at it.*

This immediacy with their schoolwork and the support of the teacher and their fellow students foster a sense of accomplishment in the young adults, as well as a belief that they will eventually be able to do the work. At El Camino's GED program, participants are reveling in what is a new experience for them, a sense of "I can do this!" Several students stated:

*I've gotten smarter since I've been coming here. My math skills have gone way up.*

*I've learned how to break down a problem to the simplest level so that I can understand it.*

*I only have two parts of the test to take. I have to review and then I'm ready!*

*I feel ready now! It's going to be a piece of cake!*

On a cold evening at HCZ YACI, over a dozen young adults, some who are single parents, a few who take care of elderly grandparents, and some who look after younger family members, stroll into a nondescript classroom, pick up their notebooks, and take their place in their assigned group. When the teacher enters the room, the students, whose past experiences with schools have been punctured with failure, become animated, asking questions, wanting to know the assignment for the day or what chapter to work on next. A safe environment, a welcoming and accepting staff, and a teacher who gives them personal attention all translate into

creating a program that believes in them and helps them believe in themselves —  
and that makes all the difference.

YACI AT NEW HEIGHTS  
NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER

## Overview of Organization and Community

At New Heights, there is no better advertisement for YACI than the receptionist who meets and greets visitors at the front desk. Visitors are made to feel welcomed by a young Latina, with whom the young people can identify because she is from the community and is a YACI graduate. The reception area has a busy feel as some young people fill out job applications, others look through want ads, and others socialize outside the computer lab before entering to update resumes. From the crowded reception area, it is clear that YACI is in full motion at New Heights.

The goal of New Heights Neighborhood Center (NHNC) is to make a solid connection between out-of-school youth and local businesses in the Washington Heights/Inwood area of Manhattan. NHNC staff acknowledge that it is a hard road for out-of-school youth to become employed, stay employed, and build a career. Therefore, NHNC embarks on expediting the entry of these young adults into the labor force, especially in local growth industries such as health, technology and banking. NHNC provides work-related services, maintains contact with local employers, and collaborates with other community organizations to provide a full array of resources and supports necessary to meet the needs of this population.

NHNC is located in Washington Heights/Inwood, which is home to the largest enclave of immigrants (predominately Dominicans) in New York City. The unemployment rate for the community is close to 15 percent, five percentage points higher than the overall city rate. Unemployment in Washington Heights is compounded by the large influx of immigrants from the Dominican Republic who tend to be disproportionately female, with less than 50 percent high-school-completion rate; both males and females generally have low labor-force participation and earnings.<sup>19</sup>

NHNC is located between two neighborhood behemoths, the sprawling complex of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and the 168<sup>th</sup> Street Armory. Interestingly, the location of the NHNC office illustrates the dichotomy of the community. The office space is on the second floor of the armory, which also houses the National Track and Field Hall of Fame, which opened in 2003. This part of the building is well maintained, and the floors and surrounding walls are impeccable. Next door, another section of the armory is in decay and houses homeless men who gather on the front steps of the museum to ask for money.

## Initial Development and Implementation

When NHNC sought involvement in YACI, it was to strengthen its Worker

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<sup>19</sup> New York City Department of City Planning. Manhattan Community District 12 Profile, 2002..

Advancement through Technology (WATT) Program. WATT has a two-pronged approach:

1. Work with businesses to create and develop positions for the young adults.
2. Work with the young adults to prepare them for internships and employment in neighborhood agencies.

NHNC has spent much time building relationships with other organizations in the Washington Heights/Inwood area and has identified workforce needs in such areas as clerical, retail, medical office, and banking. These strong linkages with local businesses have expedited the young adults' entry into the labor force. For example, NHNC has placed participants in neighborhood chain stores, such as Rite Aid, as well as in large institutions such as Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. The armory was one of the first places to provide jobs and internships, and this partnership continues to expand as young adults have been hired, for the last two years, to serve as guides and to work in the concession stands.

NHNC has worked diligently to build relationships with neighborhood businesses but has not limited its scope to local industries only. In 2004, NHNC developed a relationship with the 1199 Service Employees International Union, which has been fruitful. In the first year, 1199 hired six WATT participants, and one was promoted, which is exceptional, given that many of these jobs require a high school diploma and prior work experience. In summer 2005, there were also three WATT youth participating in the 1199 Nurses Assistant Training Program, which prepares them for employment at the hospital upon completion of the training; two were subsequently hired.

At NHNC, there is an intake/assessment process followed by the development of an individual service plan for every participant. Then participants are ready to begin the WATT program, a two week work-readiness series that covers such topics as job and career interests, interview preparation, and "job searching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." After completing the work-readiness series, participants take a 12-week internship with a stipend at a local business. Upon completing or during the internship, the young adults have access to resources (space, telephones, and computers) and support from the staff to conduct a job search. Staff is available to assist with job retention, re-employment if a placement does not work out, and referral to education, training, and support services.

As of March 2005, NHNC has served 309 young adults; of these, 131 young adults obtained jobs, 138 entered a GED program, and 17 passed it.<sup>20</sup> During the latter half of the year, NHNC served a total of 178 out of school youth; of these, 36 young adults obtained jobs, 69 entered a GED program, and 11 passed the GED exam.

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<sup>20</sup> New Heights Neighborhood Center Biannual Report to Youth Development Institute, Summer 2005.

## YDI Role

### Grantmaking

From its inception, NHNC's goal has been to bridge the gap between the community's out-of-school youth and the thriving community businesses, especially in the armory where the program is located. To achieve this, from the beginning of YACI, NHNC embarked on an aggressive fundraising campaign to solidify its programming. In its first year, NHNC raised additional funds to hire a career consultant as well as to run a summer GED class. In addition, in 2005, NHNC conducted its first fundraiser and will continue to do such events, as well as ask the board to sponsor larger fundraisers.

YDI intervention has specifically bolstered NHNC fundraising in two instances:

1. Through YDI, NHNC was connected with the Pinkerton Foundation, whose grant officer visited NHNC and subsequently requested and accepted a proposal, which has supported the hiring of three new staff members. The foundation renewed a grant to the agency for 2005-06.
2. NHNC is partner in a YDI-led citywide effort, supported by the Youth Transition Funders Group,<sup>21</sup> to expand efforts in New York City for youth who have become disconnected from public schools. As part of this initiative, NHNC received a grant of \$25,000. Other partners include the New York City Department of Education, New Visions for Public Schools, and Neighborhood Family Services Coalition.
3. NHNC has also become a part of YDI's Community Educational Pathways to Success initiative, receiving \$70,000 over two years (2005-07) to implement an integrated literacy and youth development model for pre-GED students (see East Side case study, p.20).

As a result of its vigorous fundraising efforts in the past year, NHNC has been able to enhance its infrastructure, in part through increased staff, and move towards providing more comprehensive education and employment services. For example, NHNC received a significant grant, mentioned above, that allowed for three staff people to come on board — a director of programs, a job developer, and a career specialist. In addition, funding from several city agencies and through the office of a U.S. congressman has continued to support NHNC's work, and the executive director has been cultivating relationships with new potential funders.

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<sup>21</sup> A Chicago-based grantmakers network, whose mission is to help all youth make a successful transition to adulthood by age 25.

## Other YDI Technical Assistance Strategies with NHNC

Besides helping NHNC strengthen its funding sources, YDI staff helped NHNC build marketing and programming capacity, as described briefly below:

- \* YDI staff facilitated the hiring of a consultant to help NHNC develop high-quality marketing materials to communicate with a varied audience, especially funders.
- \* YDI staff made available to NHNC a database specialist to ensure that NHNC could produce the type of data it needed, as well as the data funders and policymakers need. New Heights already had an extensive customized database developed in ACCESS over five years, which was then fine-tuned with the help of the YDI specialist. In effect, the New Heights database was used as a model for the METRIX database that other YACI sites adapted.
- \* To support young adults through the many obstacles they face to long-term employment, NHNC implemented retention workshops to help the young adults improve their skills. YDI staff assisted in identifying guest speakers for these workshops. However, according to the summer 2005 report, these workshops were not a success, given the difficulty of asking participants to attend workshops during the day once they are employed. Scheduling classes during the evenings was also not successful. As a result, NHNC has decided to conduct quarterly workshops on topical issues — for example, a tax workshop during tax season.
- \* The Fund for the City of New York has supported NHNC's Tech Immersion Program, which introduces students to the world of computer graphics and animation. The Fund provides internships for selected NHNC participants to travel to its downtown offices and gain experience in these computer programs. This has been a very successful collaboration, with over half of participants in this program reporting being currently employed.

## Challenges

As the above examples demonstrate, NHNC, a small independent organization, has made considerable inroads in its funding and programming; however, as NHNC grows it faces the continuous challenge of understaffing. As stated above, in 2005, NHNC was able to hire much-needed staff, but only through vigorous fundraising will NHNC be able to continue to hire the staff needed to carry out its current, and expanding programming.

In 2005, New Heights experienced an increase in the number of youth coming back to pursue their educational — rather than their employment — goals. This was, in all likelihood, the result of a tight job market for out-of-school youth, as well as youth being more hopeful about their job prospects if they pursue their education.

An ongoing challenge at NHNC is the number of youth who want to attend the GED classes. The executive director explained:

*High schools are being restructured and therefore, in this community, many young adults are being displaced from high school, especially the students who are over age and have less than 10 credits.*

These are the students that find themselves at NHNC's doors.

## **Changes In Organizational Capacity and Programming**

### **Changes in Organizational Capacity**

The executive director described YDI support with the database and fundraising, which helped the entire organization:

*YDI helped me build capacity in so many ways. They looked over my database. They brought in a consultant to look over my proposals, promotional materials. Their support with fundraising has been incredible.*

Specifically the executive director mentioned the support of other sites and the collective YACI network:

*The YACI network has been like a support group for me. It's been a good experience to be around other organizations working with disconnected youth. It's always a learning experience when you hear other staff. You get ideas that you didn't think about. You can ask questions to people that are struggling with the same thing you're struggling with.*

The executive director also mentioned the value of information about youth development:

*All the articles, literature I get from YDI, I bring back to my staff. Their research helps me keep focused on youth development. I then tweak the information and communicate it back to my staff. That way when I say we need to create a safe environment for our young people, we are all on the same page.*

In short, the executive director claimed: “If it wasn't for YDI, I don't think NHNC would still be here.” Clearly, the type of support characterized by YDI's technical assistance and capacity building efforts were well suited to the needs of this site. The staff appreciate the learning and progress this assistance has brought about and acknowledge its appropriateness for future development and sustainability.

## Changes in Programming

One of NHNC goals was to intensify and solidify its program by 1) having an on-site GED class; 2) being able to refer young people for testing after determination of readiness for GED test; and 3) providing additional services that increase the number of hours in the day the youth participate on site. YDI's facilitation of a consultant helped NHNC accomplish these goals. In February 2005, New Heights began the Off-site Educational Services (OES) GED program for out-of-school youth. Through OES, the New York City Department of Education places certified teachers on site at community-based organizations to provide GED instruction for students up to age 21. The program registered 44 youth and granted six GEDs.<sup>22</sup>

This intensified program is now on site and there is no need to refer participants out. The program is longer — participants now spend four months in the program, while previously they spent from two- to-four weeks.

In addition, services are now more integrated — that is, there is less opportunity for participants to withdraw or get lost in the program. All these structural changes create more opportunities to strengthen factors fostering youth resiliency — in particular by building caring relationships between staff and participants and between participants and their peers, as well as fostering a sense of continuity and attachment.

To achieve this, NHNC has created a warm and welcoming environment for young adults. As stated above, when young adults walk in, they are greeted with enthusiastic professionalism by staff members who are close to them in age and come from similar cultural backgrounds. This sends a strong “role model” message, allowing the young adult participants to view “others who look like them” as professionals.

In addition to creating a welcoming atmosphere, through program observations it is clear that staff has high expectations of young people and much time and effort are spent providing young adults with future orientation. During a workshop on preparing for a job interview, the facilitator took the time to practice a job scenario with each individual participant and then each participant went through a mock interview with the facilitator. This was a difficult task and took much encouragement and support to take participants through this process.

Afterwards, the facilitator reflected with the participants about the mock interviews, and participants revealed that they were not accustomed to speaking

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<sup>22</sup> New Heights Neighborhood Center Biannual Report to Youth Development Institute, Summer 2005..

in public and were very nervous and afraid of making mistakes. However, while speaking out was a challenge, participants made it clear that going through the mock interviews was helping them gain much-needed skills:

*It helped me get rid of my fear of talking.*

*It was hard, but it won't be so hard the next time. I have to do it.*

*I'm glad I went through this because now I know when the real thing comes, I can do it. I was afraid I was just going to sit there and say nothing.*

The responses from focus-groups participants also illustrate that NHNC has broadened participants' awareness of employment, educational goals, and career options. Participants articulated the types of careers they were interested in and were aware of how much schooling they needed to accomplish these goals — an indication that they have been involved in career planning:

*I'd like to study architecture or business administration. I need to know math and how to draw and I need to go to college.*

*I'll probably have a job as a nurse assistant/counselor — probably be doing job training and college advising.*

*I want to be a chef and go to college, to chef school.*

*I want to go to John Jay College and study to be a homicide detective or social worker or a corrections officer.*

One young adult participant described the central role of NHNC in the community:

*It's the only place in the neighborhood where you can come and, if you're serious, you can get your GED, get computer training, and get a job.*

This description of NHNC mirrors the executive director's statement of the role of NHNC:

*My intent is for NHNC to become the central place in the community for young people to have one-stop access to resources to advance their education and their employability.*

## **The Experiences of Youth**

Who are these young adults who are finding their way to NHNC? Not surprisingly, the young adults attending NHNC are reflective of the young adults described by Wald and Martinez in the literature regarding disconnected youth, cited in the introduction. Site visits and interviews reveal that many

participants at NHNC have at least two, if not three of the traits Wald and Martinez (2003) cite as typical of older disconnected youth—having no high school diploma, having a justice system record, living in foster care, and being an unmarried parent. A composite of the participants observed and interviewed at NHNC demonstrates the long-term and multilayered levels of support needed to keep these young adults engaged in their own process of development, as well as the challenges of finding a good job.

- ❖ A male participant involved with NHNC for three years has been through NHNC's program spectrum and has obtained a full-time job through NHNC; however, this young man continues to struggle with the GED. As a consequence, he is unable to seek promotion or earn a greater salary. NHNC staff put in a great deal of effort — phone calls, one-to-one pep conversations — to keep this young man motivated enough to stay at his current job and continue to take GED classes.
- ❖ Another male participant involved with NHNC for two years found employment through NHNC, but has no high school diploma and also has an arrest record. This young man requires intense case management to stay employed, attend GED classes, and not return to the lure of the streets.
- ❖ A female participant involved with NHNC for two years is a single parent, and her attendance at NHNC has been spotty. After much intervention by NHNC staff — phone calls and one-on-one sessions — she has “hunkered down” and has been attending the GED class more regularly and, with assistance from NHNC staff, is putting together her resume.

As the literature on disconnected youth points out, the world of work has become much more complex and obtaining the entry-level jobs that previously served as a training ground for young adults has become much more difficult. This is illustrated by the experiences of these young adults, who also find their way to NHNC.

- ❖ A male participant with a high school diploma indicated that he “looked very hard for a job, but didn’t get anything because he has no experience.” He has participated in most of the employment training at NHNC and has been hired as a seasonal worker at the agency. He feels his experience at NHNC will strengthen his employment prospects.
- ❖ A female participant took the GED test through NHNC and is awaiting the results. Since she is unsure if she passed the test, college does not appear realistic to her at this time. She says of the employment training at NHNC, “You learn real professional skills here. I know enough to work in a bank, in an office, but I don't have experience so I'm waiting around to see what opens up.’

\* A female participant, a mother, without a high school diploma, came to NHNC because she needed to work. She participated in the employment training and was delighted when she was hired by a local bank, but she returned three months later to NHNC because “it was a telemarketing job and she hates selling.” She is now taking the GED class and learning advanced computer technology.

As the literature and these personal experiences reveal, disconnected young adults face many obstacles in the world of work. Nevertheless, what became evident through focus-group discussions is that these young adults — despite all the difficulties they have faced — have “connected” to NHNC and because of that, they have found new skills and a renewed sense of hope and fortitude. Some comments spoke of a new-found interest in education, compared with previous feelings of failure in school:

*I want to go to college now. I never felt that school was for me, that school was worth it. I thought it was BS, but I've changed. I'm determined to go to college.*

*I realize I have opportunities when I leave here. I will have job skills, a GED, a resume. I feel much more comfortable to go out there.*

Other comments arose from a need to prove to themselves and to others that they could do it:

*I do this for me, even though I come from a tough neighborhood; I want to prove it to myself that I can do this.*

*I want to prove everybody wrong — even though I have a baby, I can go to school and finish and make something of myself.*

As with YACI participants at other sites, focus-group participants at NHNC stated that an important element of YACI was its “safe,” nonjudgmental atmosphere. Participants described feeling safe at NHNC because they are accepted and encouraged to work together. Participants also described viewing their teachers at NHNC as advocates rather than being at odds with them, as they often were with their high school teachers. Typical quotes in this vein included:

*I feel comfortable because we're all here for the same thing. Nobody is better than anybody; nobody is smarter.*

*We don't judge each other in this class, we work together to help each other.*

*It's not like high school if you make a mistake or say something wrong automatically you become a big joke. The teachers here don't tolerate that.*

*The teachers here always try to find a way to help you. They don't pamper you, but they don't give up on you. They treat you like an adult.*

NHNC continues to be the place in their community where these young people go in search of a GED, professional skills, and a better opportunity for them to make their dreams come true — both for themselves and for the future generation, their children.

YACI AT SESAME FLYERS  
INTERNATIONAL

## Overview of Organization and Community

At Sesame Flyers International job-readiness training, young adults learn not only how to get a job, but how to keep it. As part of the Helping You Help Yourself Career Center, the “GET R.I.C.H.” (Reaching Individuals to Change Humanity) program exposes young people to an array of employment skill-building workshops, as well as one-on-one employment counseling. The young adults who have gone through the GET R.I.C.H. training speak about the family-like atmosphere in the cohort-based trainings and the importance of learning how to present oneself when applying for a job. Two participants described their experiences in the program:

*For me, the most important part of the whole program was the way that they taught us . . . like once you get the job how to act when you get the job. [The job developer] had me working and volunteering in the state department office, they told me how to dress and how to act in the job, and it all paid off.*

*Make sure you write this down. They bring us in like a family. They are like the two big mothers that we needed. We came in as strangers . . . but I love these girls now.*

Sesame Flyers International is a nonprofit organization operating various cultural, recreational, and educational youth development programs in and around the greater East Flatbush community. Sesame Flyers was founded in 1983 by a group of Caribbean immigrants committed to offering their children a place to learn about their cultural heritage. In the intervening 20 years, the organization has grown into one of the leading community-based organizations in Flatbush offering high-quality services to youth. One staff member explained:

*This is an organization that was started by Caribbean immigrants as a place to retain their culture, teach their kids, and have a place for children in the community. We are all committed to this mission — make a nice place for the kids. Make a world where the kids could flourish.*

Sesame Flyers young adult programming takes place at two main, school-based sites, both within Beacon Centers that the agency operates — one in the East Flatbush area of Brooklyn and the other in Canarsie. Together, these two locations serve people of all ages in the Flatbush, East Flatbush, Crown Heights, and Canarsie neighborhoods. Through the operation of two local Beacons sites, Sesame Flyers International reaches a broad range of people, of all ages, and with a variety of needs.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Funded and administered by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), the Beacons are school-based community centers, offering a range of activities and services to participants of all ages, before and after school, in the evenings, and on weekends. (See second-last paragraph, p. 4.)

## Initial Development and Implementation

Before the YACI grant, Sesame Flyers provided a broad range of services for young adults through its work with the two Beacons. These activities included social and recreational activities like basketball and dance, as well as academic and employment activities, such as GED classes, counseling by case workers, and peer supports. While Sesame Flyers had historically served young people, the organization had not specifically addressed the issue of youth who are out of school or looking for a job. The YACI grant allowed Sesame Flyers staff to begin to build a program that would serve young people in this new capacity. With the YACI grant the organization was able to initiate a youth employment program, a service gap the organization had felt unable to address before YACI.

When a young person enrolls in the GET R.I.C.H. program, there is an initial meeting with the program director. At this meeting, the young person talks about his/her goals and fills out a Career Zone assessment to inform program staff about his/her job/internships interests and suitability. The participant is then placed in the next cohort for the job-readiness training.

A cohort of 7-10 participants meets three hours a day, four days a week. In addition to these four days, each participant meets with one staff member once a week. During the class time, the group is instructed in a number of job-readiness skills, including resume building, job search skills, interviewing techniques, and computer training. These services have expanded over the YACI years, as described later in this case study.

The Career Make Over cycle consists of these six weeks of training and then seven weeks where the participant tries to get a job. During these seven weeks, participants meet regularly with program staff for one-on-one career counseling and progress reports, as well as to work on interviewing techniques and revise his/her resume as needed. After about 13 weeks in all — including the initial six weeks of skills training — the young person is welcome to drop in for informal meetings at any time. Alumni speak to new participants in the program, sharing their successes and challenges. As quoted in the 2005 report to YDI, the YACI program director explained this approach:

*We manage to keep in touch with all our participants through email [the agency has provided YACI participants with email addresses] and telephone calls just to let them know that someone cares about them and is impressed with the success that they have achieved. We also see to it that we can be a support when their plans don't go as they would have hoped and are in need of assistance with staying on the right track.<sup>24</sup>*

In 2005, the GET R.I.C.H. program completed two Career Make Over cycles and began its third cycle in March 2006. Services have been delivered to 33 youth during this period.<sup>25</sup>

## YDI Role

### Conceptualization

When the Sesame Flyers executive director was asked about the early conceptualization of the YACI program, he stated that YDI director was instrumental in educating the organization about the unmet needs of disconnected youth and young adults, convincing the staff that the agency had untapped resources and in-house expertise to address those needs. These resources included the Beacons network and a very strong youth council that worked at the Beacons where Sesame Flyers was housed.

These youth councils are made up of young adults who are in school and are usually very high-achieving. Sesame Flyers staff had heard various members of the council mention family members and friends who were out of school and/or work and needed help finding a job. This sparked the agency's initial ideas about how to recruit disconnected youth. The Sesame Flyers proposal to YDI described the youth council as a powerful tool for recruiting this population: council members would be able to “communicate in two languages, at the program and the peer levels,” and “help to translate the needs of their peers.” While this use of the council proved effective, it was limited. Ongoing recruitment into the program required dedicated staff time, which the youth council was unable to provide, and ultimately a dedicated outreach coordinator was hired (as described below).

### Grantmaking

The initial YACI grant of \$40,000 was a small portion of Sesame Flyers' annual budget of \$2 million, but this small amount was used to gain entry into the competitive funding market and expand the agency's youth employment component. The executive director described the process of applying for subsequent grants over the past year as much different since the YACI program had started:

*Being able to list and describe YACI under “previous experience” demonstrates that we already have experience running programs like these.*

He also explained an important lesson about “over-promising” to funders. Through the process of implementing the YACI program, he went on to explain

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<sup>24</sup> Sesame Flyers 2006 report to YDI.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

that the organization had originally under-anticipated the cost per participant. He explained that he now had a more realistic expectation of how much it cost to run a program for disconnected young adults:

With YACI, we learned the downfall of over-promising. We stretched very far to reach the goals that we had promised. YACI inspired us to work towards a goal, but we were working on borrowed energy — staff energy — so getting additional support has been important.

The initial YDI grant was a catalyst for three other grants. These included:

- \* A community service block grant from the Neighborhood Development Area contract to the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development for \$79,000.
- \* A Workforce Investment Act grant of \$150,000 to fund a summer youth employment piece for 50 participants. With this money, the agency also plans to hire a full-time job developer to work year round.
- \* A summer youth employment grant from New York City Department of Youth and Community Development of \$60,000 to fund a seven-week, 17-hour program covering topics such as work readiness, financial literacy, and career and college exploration; 317 youth, including some GET RICH participants, took part in summer 2006.

The NDA funding allowed Sesame Flyers to hire three part-time staff and bring on the GET R.I.C.H. program director as a full-time employee. This was particularly important to the executive director who described one of his major challenges as retaining qualified staff, stating simply: “It’s really hard to hold on to qualified staff when you can only hire them part time.” However, the GET R.I.C.H. program director described one challenge of this outside funding — addressing the needs of the young people and the evaluation needs of the contracts:

*I’m constantly caught in the middle of trying to help these kids and then trying to prove to the funders that I actually helped this kid in the way that they want to hear about. It feels like a losing battle.*

### **Other YDI Technical Assistance Strategies with Sesame Flyers**

Besides funding, YDI has provided technical assistance in a number of specific areas, including professional development of staff. Sesame Flyers staff spoke highly of the non-funding aspects of YDI support, with one staff person asserting: *YDI does not just provide funds, it’s the TA — a way to think about the ways and means for youth.*

For example, in 2003-04, YDI provided a consultant to work with the executive director to develop a statement of Sesame Flyers' current programs and future goals. YDI staff also helped Sesame Flyers staff begin to get the METRIX database integrated into the daily routine of the program. In addition, YDI helped the YACI original staff member advocate within the agency for the YACI program, which resulted in the hiring of more staff, and all these staff described YDI support as essential in helping them advocate within the agency for more resources. YDI also helped the newly hired outreach coordinator plan recruitment strategies.

One staff member described the peer exchanges initiated by YDI in year two and the "learning communities" initiated by YDI in year three as important in sustaining the sites:

*It gives me a chance to get out of my myopic perspective. It takes some time, but it's worth it because you get to see how others put their vision into a program.*

She also mentioned a resource guide with information about foundations that support work with young adults, developed by the learning community in which the agency participated, as a "care package" for the rest of the YACI network.

## Challenges

### *Defining Target Population for Employment Program*

Perhaps the biggest challenge the Sesame Flyers YACI program has faced has been defining the target population for its young adult programming. One of the important lessons that Sesame Flyers staff leadership described learning through implementing the YACI grant was that there were many subgroups within the larger group of "disconnected youth." This insight into the population led the agency to develop a more refined focus on more recently disconnected youth as well as on young people who were still in school, but, who, in the words of the executive director, "might be making bad decisions" — they might be "un-focused" or "too focused on materialism," but still "they want to work."

The executive director maintained that this refocusing was undertaken because the agency did not have sufficient resources to handle the social service needs of some disconnected youth and could effectively serve only young adults still in, or very recently out of, school:

*The ones that come in are recently out of school are still young enough to be open to what options there are and haven't been burned by the system. The more disconnected youth need much more intensive work than we can deliver at this point. These kids need more support that this program has the funding for.*

This decision to serve marginally disconnected youth, as well as those who are in school but may become disconnected, was made after designing the employment

curricula and finding that it was insufficient to address the emotional, social, and interpersonal needs that more disconnected youth often brought to the program. Because the agency lacked the resources to address these needs, staff decided to be more specific about whom they recruited for the employment training. At the end of year three, one staff member described the ideal participant as a person, “who is at a place in their life when they need a job and are ready for a job,” not, as this staff member continued, more disconnected young adults, like those, with criminal justice issues or who did not have their GED. “We don’t have the resources for that, other programs do.”

This refinement in the focus of the target population for the employment program led to a shift in recruitment strategies over the three years of the YACI grant. As stated above, initially, the agency saw the youth council as a powerful tool to recruit disconnected young adults. However, in the second year, the agency realized that members of the council were much younger and “connected” and did not have the necessary experience to relate to “young people with troubles.” One staff member described it this way:

*The program really wanted to use the youth council as the mechanism that would get other parts of the young adult community into the program. The problem was that the youth council is not really associated with people who are out of school. They are in very different social circles.*

In year three, partially as a result of YDI advocacy, the program hired a part-time staff member to do outreach and recruiting. This allowed for sustainable recruiting efforts to engage young adults who might be interested in the GET R.I.C.H. employment program. With the decision to serve marginally disconnected youth and the addition of a dedicated outreach coordinator, the program has become poised to recruit young adults who are appropriate for the employment curricula and who can be sufficiently served by the staff and resources available.

## **Changes In Organizational Capacity and Programming**

### **Changes in Organizational Capacity**

#### *Increases in Staff*

The increased staff at Sesame Flyers has been the greatest area of growth in the agency’s capacity to deal with the young adult population, with the addition of three new staff members. The GET R.I.C.H. program is now overseen by a program director who also oversees youth programming across Sesame Flyers. Instead of running the YACI program amidst a number of other youth programs, the program director now has a staff that includes herself, a job-readiness counselor, and an outreach coordinator. In addition, the agency is currently searching

for a job developer. The addition of this staff — one full and two part-time — has made a great difference in the youth employment component. The original staff member described the first part of the grant period this way:

*For the first two and a half years, I was the sole person responsible for recruitment, design, implementation, and outcomes. This meant I was pretty limited in what I could accomplish in an eight-hour day. Little by little, we got more support from the agency and additional staff.*

The particular staff hired is just as important as how many have been hired. In hiring, the agency looked for engaging young adults familiar with the agency, its mission, and target population. Both the GET R.I.C.H. program director and the job-readiness counselor are young, college graduates from the neighborhoods that YACI serves. The more recently hired outreach coordinator is a young male graduate of the GET R.I.C.H. program who completed his GED through other services offered by Sesame Flyers.

#### *Need for Professional Development*

Another important lesson, after the need for adequate staff, was the need to provide professional development for those staff. The program director described the usefulness of the YDI trainings, as well as professional development training provided by the New York City Department of Education through an outside consulting agency:

*I really needed to learn how to run a program and I needed training in how to map out the program. Through [the professional development I received], I was able to look at research in the area, make an action plan, and think about how to sustain the model that we were developing.*

In particular, staff described needing support in training young staff to work with young people. For example, initially, the GET R.I.C.H. program director stated that she needed more training working with youth, although she felt her own youth (she was just out of college) provided a useful perspective. During her first year on the job, Sesame Flyers did arrange for various types of professional development in addition to the YDI support. When interviewed at the end of year three, the program director did not express uncertainty about her approach to working with young adults, and during observations, it was evident that she had become an effective mentor and leader.

#### *Infusion of Youth Development*

Sesame Flyers demonstrates youth development principles throughout its organizational structure, its programming, and most significantly, through its staff. As mentioned above, the three staff members responsible for designing and implementing the job-readiness curriculum, as well as recruiting partici-

pants into the program, are all young adults and attended the same schools as the young adults in the GET R.I.C.H. program. These staff serve as role models to participants, demonstrating both the reality and the accessibility of education and employment opportunities.

The outreach coordinator is the best example of this; as stated above, he came through the GET R.I.C.H. program. An interviewed YACI participant described the importance of having young staff from the neighborhood:

*It helps because they are younger. Programs like this need people in our age range. It is definitely easier to hear it from people your own age. And it helps that they came from here — this neighborhood. They're like us. . . They've been through the same stuff...hearing it from them is a reassurance that it's true.*

### Changes in Programming

There has been considerable growth over the three years of the YACI program at Sesame Flyers — the program has grown from one employee helping young adults with their resumes, to a structured 13-week program, using a detailed curriculum. It weaves together training in computers and resume building, as well as more long-term planning skills, such as budgeting and career planning. As the program has evolved over the last four years, there has been more attention paid to the “soft skills” that are part of job readiness, including timeliness, self-esteem, and confidence building. The program director described this need as the following:

*The biggest need is “attitudes.” How they view themselves in relationship to the world is everything. There is utter lack of self-esteem. Because they think that they're not capable, they sabotage everything — holding down a job becomes impossible. Just teaching them about a resume and cover letter is not enough if they feel like they can't do anything right.*

These soft skills are considered as important as the more traditional employment skills. The program director described trying to teach these skills to participants through the workshops and through obtaining opportunities for them to volunteer:

*We are giving youth hope, skills to make them marketable, such as interview skills, ways to succeed in education [like computer classes], opportunities to volunteer to have things to put on their job resume, and ways to learn how to navigate and make decisions for themselves.*

The expansion of the employment counseling component of the job-readiness training was an effort to address some of the larger issues involved in getting a job, such as self-esteem and having goals. The program director explained:

*In the one-on-one meetings, we can go into their heads and create a nurturing relationship with them. I ask them to write down the things that they learn so that they can see that they are learning and can learn. Like, “I know how to create an Excel spreadsheet.” I want to reinforce what they've learned and give them a sense of self-esteem about learning.*

However, this same staff member cautioned about the need to distinguish between therapeutic interventions and employment counseling and asserted the limits of her own training to tackle the deeper issues that sometimes surfaced in the process of looking for a job. She emphasized the need to address these larger issues in a more appropriate setting and with staff trained to help young adults in these areas.

The job developer to be hired will create and maintain a database of internships and community liaisons that will hire graduates of the Sesame Flyers GET R.I.C.H. program, and program staff hope to place every person who finishes the job readiness program. One staff person stated:

*That would be the best kind of advertising for the program. It would be great word-of-mouth and it would add more legitimacy to our job-readiness program.*

## **The Experiences of Youth**

### **Learning Useful Skills**

When the young adults were asked to reflect on the GET R.I.C.H. program, some described having learned important interviewing skills, like making eye contact, hand-shaking, and not to say “huh.” One participant described how different going on a job interview was after having gone through the job-readiness program:

*This program really helped me because right before I started the program I went on a Starbucks interview. The lady asked me if I liked coffee, I said no, if I drank coffee, I said no. But at the program they taught me that I have to have an interest in the product in order to get the job.*

Others described the group discussions and hearing about other people’s experiences as very useful. Still others told about the skills they learned, like making a budget:

*They taught us everything, they really did. They showed us how to manage our money after we got it. They taught us about budgeting, that was the best part.*

One of the other “take-aways” that participants described being useful were the email addresses that the program provided for them.

### Future Orientation

Most participants were very articulate about the type of job they wanted: “I want to be a psychiatrist — I want to learn about how people think;” “I want to be a lawyer;” “I want to be a pediatrician.” One young woman wanted to work with the Jackie Robinson program and another as a restaurant manager or television producer. Each young person had learned the steps necessary to reach their goals. For all participants interviewed, this was new information — they had not previously understood how much education was necessary to reach their goals:

*I know it's going to be a burden... I have to finish high school, like three years more, go to college, and then I think there's like even more school after that. And then there's like a license at the end.*

In one focus group, more than half of the participants were not actually engaged in looking for work but were considering it and thinking about potential futures, a new notion for many of them. However not everyone was interested in thinking about career aspirations. Some young adults were more focused on simply getting a job for the weekends and summer. One young man was trying to get a job at McDonalds at night or at the mall where he could meet people. Another young man told the interviewer that he really wanted go to cooking school to become a chef and own his own restaurant. He was currently working in a restaurant, but wanted a better job at a place where he could “work up the ranks.” The program was helping him to write his resume and get a better job to help him achieve his goal.

College was on the minds of about half the participants, with a number of them thinking about New York City and State colleges. This group described a representative of George Washington University who talked with them about college life. What was most important about this guest speaker was that this person “looked like us:”

*It made it look like if they could do it we could do it. You don't have to go to the best college in the world to get a good education. It opened up my eyes.*

### “A Bigger World Out There”

Finally, focus-group participants stated that that the program had introduced them to a “world outside the neighborhood.” For many of the young adults, field trips into Manhattan were the first time that they had been outside Brooklyn and sometimes outside their own neighborhood:

*They taught us that the world is so much bigger than East Flatbush, Crown Heights...Brooklyn. There's a lot out there.*

*They tell you that there's more than Brooklyn...there's a wider world out there and being out in the real world is not easy...there's a lot for us to see, there's a lot of opportunities.*

This exposure to external resources and opportunities, as well as to the world beyond their neighborhood, was an extremely important lesson. In sum, all participants described important lessons that they felt would help them obtain and keep a job. Many also described being able to envision a future, including college and/or employment, as well as a new sense of the “big world out there.”

As these case studies illustrate, all five YACI sites have responded to the specific needs of the young disconnected adults whom they serve. They have provided GED and pre-GED courses, job-readiness training and workshops, and ongoing employment, educational, and personal counseling. Equally as important, all sites have provided disconnected young adults with a safe space to develop and improve their skills and gain the attitudes and confidence needed to obtain and keep a job.

# CONCLUSION

## Conclusion

All sites have encountered challenges in working with this underserved population — challenges in recruitment, retention, and in addressing the many, varied needs of the disconnected young adults in their communities. In addressing these challenges, all sites benefited from technical assistance provided by the Youth Development Institute in identifying ways to improve specific programs, develop their infrastructure, and collect, analyze, and use data to gauge program effectiveness in serving the needs of disconnected youth. All sites have also been able to use their YACI work to leverage support and funding from other community and city agencies and foundations.

Collectively, the five sites represent the main issues, challenges, and opportunities that programs designed to reconnect youth should consider. They also provide models of programs for disconnected youth for other community-based organizations across the country seeking to respond to the needs of disconnected youth and young adults.

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For information about the Young Adult Capacity Initiative, contact the Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute at [www.fcny.org](http://www.fcny.org), send an email to [ydipubs@fcny.org](mailto:ydipubs@fcny.org), or call 212-925-6675.

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## **Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute**

The Fund for the City of New York was established by the Ford Foundation in 1968 with the mandate to improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers. For nearly four decades, in partnership with government agencies, nonprofit institutions, and foundations, the Fund has developed and helped implement innovations in policy, programs, practices, and technology to advance the functioning of government and nonprofit organizations in New York City and beyond.

The Fund seeks out, adapts, applies, and assesses ways to enable government and nonprofit agencies to achieve excellence through its core programs — bridge loans, grants, incubation, and management and technology assistance, as well as through four strategic initiatives: the Center on Municipal Government Performance, the Youth Development Institute, the Center for Internet Innovation /E-Community Connect, and the Center for Nonprofit Enterprise Solutions.

As one of the Fund's strategic initiatives, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) works in New York City and nationally to build youth development policies, programs, and practices. Through its work, YDI seeks to bring together families, schools, and communities to create caring, engaging, and challenging environments in which young people work as partners with adults.

At the core of YDI's work is a vision of youth as central actors in their own lives, rather than as passive clients of services. Youth development is defined as an ongoing process in which all young people are engaged and invested and through which young people seek ways to meet their physical and social needs and build the competencies and connections they perceive as necessary for survival and success. YDI's research-based youth development framework identifies the type of experiences present when young people achieve successful adulthood. These include close relationships with caring adults, high expectations, engaging activities, opportunities for participation in decision making and activities affecting others, and continuity of support. This framework has been the basis of all YDI programs since its establishment in 1991.

For more information about the Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute, visit [www.fcny.org](http://www.fcny.org).

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## Academy for Educational Development

The Academy for Educational Development (AED) is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to addressing human development needs in the United States and throughout the world. As one of the world's foremost human and social development organizations, AED works in six major program areas: U.S. Education and Workforce Development; Global Learning; Global Health, Population and Nutrition; Leadership and Institutional Development; and Social Change. At the heart of all our programs is an emphasis on building skills and knowledge to improve people's lives.

The AED **Center for School and Community Services** is part of AED's U.S. Education and Workforce Development Group. The Center uses multidisciplinary approaches to address critical issues in education, health, and youth development. To achieve its goals, the Center provides technical assistance to strengthen schools, school districts, and community-based organizations. It conducts evaluations of school and community programs while striving to provide the skills and impetus for practitioners to undertake ongoing assessment and improvement. The Center also manages large-scale initiatives to strengthen practitioner networks and accelerate systems change and uses the knowledge gained from this work to advocate for effective policies and practices and disseminate information through publications, presentations, and on the World Wide Web. In the past 27 years, the Center has undertaken over 125 evaluation, technical assistance, and dissemination projects in 90 cities and 40 states.

In 2005, the Educational Equity Center at AED (EEC) was formed. EEC's mission is to provide equality of opportunity on a national scale in schools and afterschool settings, starting in early childhood. EEC is an outgrowth of Educational Equity Concepts, a national nonprofit organization with a 22-year history of addressing educational excellence for all children regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, disability, or level of family income. EEC seeks to ensure that equity is a key focus within national reform efforts, eliminating inequities that often limit student potential.

AED is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has offices in 167 countries and cities around the world and throughout the United States. The Center for School and Community Services is located primarily in AED's office in New York City. For more information about the Center's work, go to the Center's website at [www.aed.org/scs](http://www.aed.org/scs) or contact Patrick Montesano or Alexandra Weinbaum, co-directors, at 212-243-1110, or e-mail [sweinbau](mailto:sweinbau@aed.org) or [pmontesa@aed.org](mailto:pmontesa@aed.org).

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