

Voices and Choices:

Illinois Youth Work Professionals Discuss
Opportunities, Challenges and Options for the Profession

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On behalf of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition

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This report is one of a series of reports being developed by the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition about the youth work workforce. The Goal of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition is to help achieve its vision of a strong, valued and committed youth work profession through documentation, education and communications activities and by serving as a locus for joint action and collaboration within the field.

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Youth Worker Voices and Choices: Illinois Youth Workers Discuss Opportunities, Challenges and Options in the Profession

Executive Summary

This summary offers highlights from a qualitative study of front-line youth work professionals in Illinois, *Youth Worker Voices and Choices: Illinois Youth Workers Discuss Opportunities, Challenges and Options in the Profession*, written by the Forum for Youth Investment in partnership with the Illinois After-School Partnership at the Illinois Center for Violence Prevention (ICVP). The report discusses themes from eight focus groups that engaged 83 Illinois youth workers from both rural and urban localities around the state.

If we were to choose one focus group quote to sum up the state of the youth field from the perspective of Illinois workers, it might be this one, coming from a young Chicago-based professional: “I’m starting to see all of the advances that youth work is making. But I didn’t realize when I got into this position that I was a youth worker, and that it was youth development that I was doing.”

Youth work has advanced over the past several decades. The profession has changed and is continuing to take shape: new professional networks have formed; real career ladders – while still shaky—are beginning to be built; and new funding streams recognize the need for a workforce that focuses on the non-school hours.

And yet youth work is not well known among the general public, and apparently even less understood. Unlike teaching or practicing law, it is entirely possible to enter the field and not even know it – to know that it has a name, let alone a professional identity. The profession remains dangerously undefined relative to others.

“[Youth work] was really not anything that I thought, gee, I wanted to do this when I was a kid, but it all kind of fell into my lap. I love it, and it’s not something that I even asked for.”

It is for these reasons that ICVP and the Forum, on behalf of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition – a national coalition of youth-serving organizations and intermediaries focused on workforce issues – undertook this effort and focused our collective energy on better understanding the youth work profession. The purpose of this study was to get youth workers talking about who they are, how they are (or are not) supported in the workplace, and what it will take to attract, develop and sustain them and their colleagues into the future. It should be noted that this effort is part of a series of efforts both nationally, and in several areas around the country to capture and document the frontline youth worker workforce.

Each of the eight focus groups, while engaging different demographic slices of the workforce, addressed the same four basic questions:

- What brought you to this work and why?
- How supported do you feel in your job?
- What keeps you in this work?
- What is needed for youth work to be a strong and valued profession?

In this summary we lay out the most common themes that emerged in response to these questions—including a discussion about motivation to enter the field; youth worker preparation, what staff need to feel supported, career and professional challenges, and factors influencing decisions to stay in or leave the field.

Entry Points and Motivation

The first question focus group participants were asked was, “What brought you to this work?” As participants told their stories, two basic themes quickly emerged. Youth workers tended to fall into one of two groups of individuals – those we will call “intentionals,” and those who happened upon youth work – the “accidentals.”

“Intentionals” tended to have a strong sense early on that working with young people was something they always wanted to do. Inspired by a passion for young people, a deep identification with and concern for a particular community, or a singularly-focused drive to improve things for future generations, “intentionals” comprise a highly dedicated workforce.

A greater proportion of focus group discussants – while no less dedicated as the discussions quickly revealed – fell into a second category that we call “accidentals.” The majority of focus group participants told a story that suggests they stumbled upon youth work. These “accidentals” often cited volunteer or summer work as the route through which a career was forged.

“I was a secretary for 16 years, and I was talking to a friend of mine and telling her I wanted to go into another field. I said, ‘I’m tired of pushing papers, and I want to do something for somebody. I want to make a difference.’”

Among both groups, motivation to join the youth work profession can be summed up simply as the desire to make a difference. For most individuals, working with the younger generation provided a specific focus for directing those energies.

Listening carefully to youth worker entry points provides solid grounding for developing future organizational and public policies. The focus group data, and youth worker reports, suggest that youth workers value the fact that the profession has a range of entry points. Volunteerism and internship/part-time work experiences in college appear to naturally yield particularly fruitful attachments to the work, and often inspire a decision to make youth work a life-long vocation.

Preparation

Whether formally trained in a related field such as education or social work or recruited from the volunteer ranks or even the streets, youth workers generally report feeling unprepared for at least some aspects of their work. Once on the job, however, most report becoming “quick studies” on what is needed to do the work, further reporting that learning the job is part “trial by fire;” part co-worker support; and part access to ongoing training, professional development and supervision.

The preparation (and ongoing support) issue raises the old chicken-and-egg question, are good youth workers born or made? Youth work involves both habits of mind and standards of practice as well as just plain instinct and heart. Focus group participants discussed two aspects of preparation and their role in developing youth workers—those you can actually prepare for, through pre-service training and formal professional development—and those that no one can really prepare you for that are more about passion and purpose.

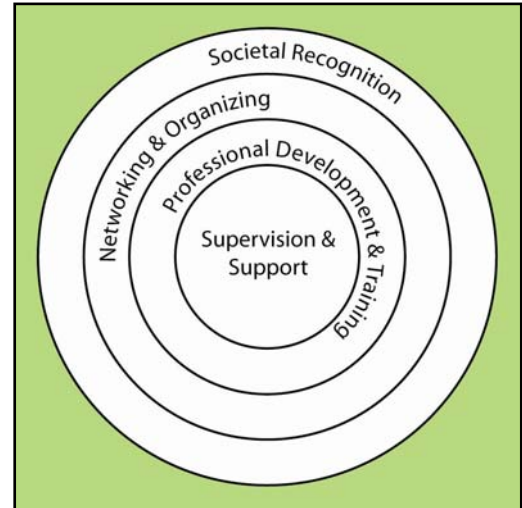
When developing youth worker preparation models—both pre-service and ongoing—make sure they square with the realities of the field, focus group discussants repeatedly cautioned. Focus group data suggest that effective models include information about practical concerns like behavioral and classroom management as well as youth development, are example-based rather

than prescriptive, move workers beyond basic frameworks for working with youth, and provide peer-based opportunities to learn and share.

Supports

In the focus groups, youth workers were asked to talk about the level and types of support they receive on the job. In analyzing comments made by participants about supports, four general categories emerged, including:

- **Supervision and support:** The majority of focus group participants report having a supportive working relationship with their supervisor. A smaller but still significant group stated that their supervisors were largely unsupportive. *The quality and nature of supervisory role can “make or break” the working experience of frontline youth workers.*
- **Professional development & training:** Though not considered a panacea, professional development and training were seen as valuable supports for frontline youth workers. Those employed by the local affiliate of a national organization or a government agency appear to have greater access to training opportunities and resources than those working in independent agencies. *Whether working within a relatively resource-rich system or an independent agency with no in-house training unit, youth workers emphatically stated the need for appropriate, ongoing professional development opportunities.*
- **Networking & organizing:** Across focus groups, when asked what would help them feel more supported, participants talked about having some kind of organization charged with advocating on behalf of youth work professionals and helping to connect them to one another. *The connections youth workers seek involve not only networking amongst themselves, but also connections to other resources related to professional and life management goals – resources that many believe would help more individuals remain in the field.*
- **Societal recognition:** The fourth layer of support youth workers seek relates to broader recognition of the field and a shift in how the work is perceived in society at large. There is a strong sentiment among youth workers that the profession is undervalued and not well-known. *Focus group participants feel this affects the field’s ability to explain youth work to the community and funders alike, and hurts its ability to advance.*



"I think a lot of times people don't realize what we do. They think that I just have the easiest job ever—that I just go and play with a bunch of kids for 3 hours and get paid for it."

Compensation

Workers feel compensation rates do not reflect the value of the work, yet they enjoy their jobs and consider them more fulfilling than better-compensated options. The pay issue is a source

of internal tension for many who question, to varying degrees, the feasibility of staying in the field long-term. Three issues emerged when youth workers discussed compensation:

- *Participants believe their wages will remain essentially flat regardless of how long they remain in the field.* Many talked about being okay with a low starting wage, but wish the field did a better job of calibrating wage increases to years of service and rewarding longevity.
- *Hourly workers were seen as particularly poorly paid, and, in some cases, poorly treated.* This was an issue of social justice, discussed at length by several youth workers (both salaried and hourly).
- *Benefits appear to either be adequate or lousy to non-existent.* While a fair share of the benefits picture in youth work can be explained by the large percentage of part-time workers, lack of access to adequate benefits is a concern for many.

"This is a rewarding career. And I think more people would choose this profession if it was more stable and paid more."

Professional Stresses and Challenges

Lack of job security, staff turnover and difficulty achieving work-life balance all contribute to the stress many youth workers experience. Stress is one of the factors that, along with compensation, determines whether individuals remain in the field long-term. Decisions to stay or leave the field come with a bit of turmoil for many. Because these are common concerns across youth work settings, focus group discussants suggest more attention be paid to the structural reasons underlying these challenges.

Many focus group participants are attempting to build the next rung of their career ladder because they want to stay in the field. Building a strong, vibrant youth work profession is of primary concern to these invested individuals. Factors they identified that would move the profession forward include:

- **Flexible and creative recruitment:** There are a range of entry points into the profession. Recruiting the future workforce with this in mind may open up options for intentional growth of the field.
- **Incentives for both early career and experienced workers:** Incentives need to be developed for recruiting and developing younger youth workers as well as attracting mid-career professionals from other fields and retaining seasoned youth workers.
- **Compensation that rewards longevity:** Youth workers suggested more should be done to reward longevity in the field. Focus group participants were consistent in noting that addressing compensation is important to reducing turnover.
- **Stable career ladders and expanded opportunities:** The rungs of the career ladder for youth workers are shaky at best. Expanding opportunities for networking and training and offering credentialing programs that align with the realities of the field are important strategies.
- **Membership and recognition:** Participants raised the need for an organizational entity of some kind charged with both supporting employee needs on the job but also broader advocacy efforts for the profession, including public awareness campaigns about the profession and its contributions to society.

"I see it being a career. I think one thing is getting other people to see it as a career. You know, we are not halfway between babysitters and teachers. There's a whole different role [in this work]. And it's important work."

Introduction

“I’m starting to see all of the advances that youth work is making. But I didn’t realize when I got into this position that I was a youth worker, and that it was youth development that I was doing.”

The above quote is not at all an odd statement to hear coming from a youth work professional. After all, she works in a field that estimates 3 to 5 million individuals among its ranks – and yet, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is the least documented, least understood and most varied of the human services professions. Casey further found that there was no national data set on youth workers, or on youth-serving programs, and that much of the data they did find was unreliable and inaccurate.¹

The youth worker has it right. Youth work is not well known among the general public, and apparently is even less understood. Unlike teaching or practicing law, it is entirely possible to enter the field and not even know it – to know that it has a name, let alone a professional identity.

And yet youth work has advanced over the past several decades. The profession has changed and is continuing to take shape: new professional networks have formed; real career ladders – while still shaky – are beginning to be built as the youth workers of the 70s and 80s have become agency directors and national advocates; and new funding streams recognize the need for a workforce that focuses on the non-school hours.

Still, the profession remains dangerously undefined relative to others (a theme echoed by youth workers in these focus groups), impacting public recognition of youth work and the ability of the field to advance further. To address this dilemma, the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition, with support from Cornerstones for Kids, has focused some of its energies on better understanding the youth work profession in the United States (see Appendix A). As part of this effort, the Forum for Youth Investment partnered with the Illinois Center for Violence Prevention to host a series of focus groups with youth workers from around the state.

This report provides a qualitative complement to the Illinois Center for Violence Prevention’s survey of nearly 300 youth work professionals across the state.² A total of 83 youth workers participated in one of eight focus groups convened in early 2006, and engaged in dialogue about their experiences in the field. Urban and rural youth workers participated in roughly equal numbers – 52 percent and 48 percent respectively. Additionally, participants reflected a range of demographic characteristics in terms of gender, age, job status and organizational setting. See Appendix B for a summary chart on participant characteristics across the eight focus groups.

The purpose of the focus groups was to get youth workers talking about who they are, how they are (or are not) supported in the workplace, and what it will take to attract, develop and sustain them and their colleagues into the future. For the purposes of this project, a youth work professional was defined as *an individual who works with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their*

¹ Casey Foundation (2003). *The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce*. Retrieved from www.aecf.org/initiatives/hswi/report_rev.pdf.

² Barton- Villagrana, H., Becker-Mouchine, J. (forthcoming). *Illinois After-School Partnership Workforce Survey*. Chicago, IL: Illinois Center for Violence Prevention.

*personal, social and educational development and enable them to gain a voice, influence and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence.*³

Focus group participants, by and large, recognized the terms “youth work professional” and “youth worker,” and most identified with them even though many use more specific labels or simply their job title (e.g. after-school coordinator, specialist or aide; youth development specialist, activity leader) to refer to their work. A few individuals suggested that the field and the workforce need a better descriptor to capture what can be quite varied and demanding work.

We intentionally led with a broad definition of youth work that focuses on the worker rather than the setting, and the diversity among focus group participants reinforced that decision. Despite the many sub-fields that exist within youth work (after-school, camps, juvenile justice, recreation, etc.) and the diversity of foci (academic, prevention, youth organizing, etc.), we believe that drawing as comprehensive a picture of the field as possible will help us identify and address global workforce issues that those employed in a range of settings experience.

Each of the eight focus groups, while engaging different demographic slices of the workforce, addressed the same four basic questions (see Appendix C for the focus group protocol):

- What brought you to this work and why?
- How supported do you feel in your job?
- What keeps you in this work?
- What is needed for youth work to be a strong and valued profession?

In this report we lay out the themes that emerged in response to these questions, noting areas of agreement and divergence in the experiences of youth workers employed in a diverse range of settings.

Entry Points into Youth Work

The first question focus group participants were asked was, “What brought you to this work?” As participants told their stories, two basic themes quickly emerged. Youth workers tended to fall into one of two groups – those we will call “intentionals,” and those who happened upon youth work – the “accidentals.”

The Intentionals

Those focus group participants whom we characterize here as the “intentionals” talked about working with youth as something they always wanted to do. While some could not put a name on the profession before entering it, “intentionals” discussed being always interested in kids. Their career path was often marked by a set of deliberate choices about the work they wanted to do. Roughly a third of focus group participants talked about entering the field with some level of intentionality⁴.

“What brought me into the field was when I was in high school, I was part of our after-school program, and it encouraged me to go to college. And once in college, I volunteered, and I really liked it. So that’s what brought me to the field, being a part of it first, and now I’m working in it.”

³ Stone, B., Garza, P., Borden L. (2004). *Attracting, Developing and Retaining Youth Workers for the Next Generation*. Retrieved from www.nydic.org/nydic/documents/WingReportcomplete.pdf.

⁴ While we worked to achieve diversity both across and within groups, focus group participants are not a representative sample of the work force. When we reference the proportion or number of participants that agree or disagree with a particular theme, we are doing so only to provide a general understanding of consensus, the strength of a particular sentiment among participants, or the frequency with which a single theme was mentioned.

Several “intentionals” mentioned being involved in a youth program when they were younger or otherwise being supported by community adults – their own developmental experiences provided the inspiration for their desire to give back and to work with young people. One participant reflected, “I grew up in a great community, with wonderful mentors. And I think they are the reasons why I work with youth. I love them. It’s my passion. I hope to do it forever. Those adults made an impact on my life, and my goal is to do the same for the kids that I work with now.”

A passion for young people, a deep identification with and concern for a particular community, and a commitment to improve things for future generations all served as important motivations for entering youth work. One participant, a teacher during the school day and youth worker in the after-school hours, said, “I’m a teacher by day, but I’ve always worked with several [after-school] programs. I grew up in the South Shore community, and I want to make sure that our students are not on the street.”

“I’ve been in youth work for about 15 years. But I think I’ve always been a youth worker. It’s just in me from being an itty bitty kid myself, taking the rest of the kids to the playground and telling them to line up.”

Other “intentionals” used a different angle to talk about their entry into the field. For them, youth work was a place where their particular gifts flourished. That self-knowledge – whether gained as an 18 year-old volunteering in a club or as a 28 year-old disillusioned with a corporate career – combined with a passion for young people, motivated entry into the field for a significant number of discussants. Almost every focus group had at least one participant who mentioned they switched from another field to get into this work.

Despite their deliberate entry into this work, even many of the “intentionals” admitted not knowing the full range of options for entering or staying in the field – an admission that says more about the lack of clear entry points or steps within the field than the individuals themselves. A noteworthy subset of participants – though deliberate with regard to their passions – entered the field through the backdoor, and might be considered the “accidentally intentional.” These individuals found youth work to be the perfect context through which to advance another passion, such as justice work, literacy or the arts.

“I was first interested in working with refugees. I went to Palestine, to the occupied West Bank, and worked for a human rights organization. I volunteered with a youth program at a refugee camp there. That was the deciding factor for me. So when I came back to the United States, I wanted to work with refugee youth.”

The Accidental Youth Worker

Youth workers falling in this category could very appropriately begin their story by saying, “a funny thing happened on the way to my career...” In fact the majority of focus group participants told a story that suggests they stumbled upon youth work. One started out as an artist, and never imagined she’d be working with youth. Another was sure he was destined to be a professional football player – now he coaches youth, many of whom have professional ball-playing dreams. A certified teacher is just “passing through” until she can find a permanent teaching post.

“I was always interested in working with kids, so it felt natural to go into education. So I went to school, and got my teaching certification, and just realized that I did want to work with kids, but my aim was just a little off. So I kind of stumbled into it through Americorps, which, to me, was a great entry.”

Others were in retail or restaurant work, and this was just another position among entry-level employment options. Though some of these individuals expressed an interest in working with

youth before entering the field, most had not worked with kids in the past and weren't planning on a career in youth work.

Volunteer or summer work was often cited as a route through which an unintended, though rewarding, career path was forged. While most often pursued just to gain some experience while going through school, the volunteer/summer job entry point was summed up by one youth worker's comment: "I never thought about getting into this field. But I did it as a summer job when I was eighteen, and all of these talents that were inside of me began to come out." Many who took on volunteer or summer jobs found these roles turned into longer term commitments that eventually became the only careers they've ever known.

Some discussants intended to use youth work as a stepping stone to a teaching career or as a placeholder until something opened up in another field, but found themselves firmly attached to youth work. Several individuals mentioned that while they were interested in becoming teachers, they realized as youth workers that the structure of schools and the teaching profession might not be the way they wanted to work with youth. These entry stories actually parallel the stories of many young people's entry into youth programs. Both youth and adults are often drawn in by one thing, but end up staying for a much longer timeframe and a deeper set of connections. In some youth programs, at least, spaces are created where both youth *and* adults can find talents, create meaning and make connections.

"It was really not anything that I thought, gee, I wanted to do this when I was a kid, but it all kind of fell into my lap. I love it, and it's not something that I even asked for."

A small minority of individuals in the focus groups maintain they are "just passing through." Several respondents are currently working toward a degree, and their current plan is to move on – mostly into related fields – once they graduate. Two participants were certified teachers working in after-school programs until they can find permanent teaching positions. While these individuals self-identify as "transitional youth workers" – and some will probably end up staying longer than others – they still appear to view youth work as related to their end goal.

Lastly, a distinct cohort of individuals – almost all hourly workers – talked about their entry into the field in a way that is probably common among low-wage workers: "A job came open, and I just applied." While the individuals highlighted above entered the field "accidentally," many indicate that they truly enjoy the work.

Meaningful Work

The desire to do meaningful work was a central theme across focus groups – people want to live lives of meaning, and youth work provides a clear avenue for doing so. Quite a few focus group participants switched careers in order to become youth workers. Several participants started out in other careers, including a few private sector managers in insurance and technology, office managers/secretaries, a commercial artist, and several factory workers. The length of time that career-switchers had been in their previous careers ranged from a few years to almost two decades before changing over to youth work. For some workers – often hourly – entry-level youth work provided an alternative to entry-level work in other fields such as retail or food service.

"I was a secretary for 16 years, and I was talking to a friend of mine and telling her I wanted to go into another field. I said, 'I'm tired of pushing papers, and I want to do something for somebody. I want to make a difference.'"

Youth Workers on a Continuum: Choices, Realities & Options

Though it might be tempting to divide youth workers into blunt dichotomous categories (part-time vs. full-time workers; “intentional” vs. “accidental”; hourly vs. salaried); the experience of these focus groups suggests otherwise. Youth workers often find themselves on a variety of continua rather than bounded by an either/or dichotomy. For example, in our discussion of “intentional” and “accidental” youth workers, many individuals would describe some aspects of their entry into the field as accidental and others as intentional. A focus group participant who wanted to be a teacher was clear she wanted to work with youth, but only happened upon youth work out of frustration about the structure of the school day. Even in the hourly/salaried category, some youth workers work at a salaried position in one place, and an hourly position in another (or salaried over the school year, and hourly during the summer months). In this chart we depict a range of continua that represent the choices and realities of the youth workers we spoke to.

Full-time

According to ICVP’s survey, 46 percent of Illinois workers work full-time vs. 54 percent part-time. In focus groups, full-time and part-time workers alike seemed to enjoy the work. The part-time option may indeed be a viable and desirable alternative for a surprisingly large number of people – students, retirees, stay-at-home moms, and teachers looking for extra income. In a pattern reflective of the survey, most part-time workers suggested that they were part-time by choice – at least for the time being – though several part-time workers in the focus groups seemed unaware that a full-time career in youth work was possible.

Part-time

Intentional

As outlined in the first section of this report, youth workers enter the field from a diverse range of entry points. A notable subset of discussants specifically described youth work as something they just “fell into.” Others described their entry as ambiguous (i.e., “I didn’t know I was doing youth work...”), expressed surprise at the length of time they’ve stayed in the field (i.e., “I was just looking for a summer job...”) or have only recently contemplated youth work as a career as opposed to “just a job.” While plenty of people have intentionally chosen youth work as a career, these focus groups suggest that the field remains too unknown and too undefined to be a career of choice for most individuals.

Accidental

Salaried

Among both salaried and hourly workers, a fair proportion of individuals look for supplemental income sources by taking other jobs, a reality which softens the dichotomy between salaried and hourly workers in the youth work field. Everyone feels underpaid – and most would cite compensation as an important worker concern. Yet on several occasions, salaried workers underscored that they felt that their hourly counterparts were particularly poorly paid. One youth worker talked about being embarrassed at how low hourly staff wages were. It should be noted that some hourly workers are actually professionals supplementing income from other modestly compensated jobs – teaching or a salaried youth work job with another agency – making the distinction between hourly and salaried workers not always cut and dried.

Hourly

Mid-career Workers

In a field where it is quite possible to be considered mid-career at 30, the line between younger and mid-career youth workers is somewhat blurred. Yet mid-career worries – homeownership, quality of health benefits, the ability to finance children’s college, and retirement – all cropped up as real concerns among focus group participants. Youth workers with just one or two years experience characterized their current salary as “OK for now.” Their more seasoned peers also discussed career options, with some expressing frustration that direct youth work is considered something you are supposed to “graduate from” once you hit your 30’s, to be replaced with a managerial role. They conveyed a strong sense that the pay and benefits structures need to catch up to the needs of “real adults” and not be based on an assumption that every youth worker is a young, 20-something “just passing through.”

Young Workers

A few discussants worked in a tangentially related field – child care, work with the elderly – but shifted populations and found working with youth to be a particularly good niche for them. Still others were actually trained in college to become something else. Most common was teacher training, but post-graduation switchers also included an engineer and a journalist; their career paths got diverted so early on that they never entered these professions. Many zeroed in on their interest in kids as their primary motivation for doing this work. To discuss it in more nuanced terms, interest in children and youth draws people into the profession; commitment to children and youth keeps most of them coming back to work everyday.

Emerging from this universal commitment to youth, several workers discussed a specific calling to give back to a particular community. In some cases, individuals wanted to give youth what they never had – caring community adults willing to mold and guide. In other instances, adults sought to provide young people the individual role modeling and support they lacked growing up. One youth worker described his motivation this way: “It’s always been my desire, a passion, in terms of getting out there and helping out the community. There’s a real generational gap, especially in the African-American community. There were not many role models when I came around. I want to give back. I think as African-American males, we must step up, because nobody is gonna do it but us.”

Natural Gifts and Formal Training

Are good youth workers born or made? The age-old chicken and egg question is probably asked in most professions – there are habits of mind and standards of practice, and then there is just plain instinct and heart. Youth work, according to focus group participants, is no different. Initial comments often erred on the side of youth work being something one is either cut out for or not. Several discussants asserted that they needed no special training to become youth workers – just patience and common sense. Others tempered this assertion with statements more akin to this one made by a certified teacher working in an after-school program: “I don’t think it is as much about extra education as it is about classroom management skills, whether those are skills you gain through an actual formalized education or just life experience. That’s what’s most important.”

Further into several discussions, it became apparent that people’s perspectives on this issue were more nuanced than initial comments suggested. Even those who came to the field with a decent dose of passion and common sense quickly picked up on the need to gain knowledge and develop skills related to working with youth. One participant reflected, “I think when I started at the age of 22, and I was wide-eyed and all excited. I thought having a good heart and compassion and excitement and enthusiasm for kids was enough. And certainly I think that that’s the fuel behind it. But I think that if I could go back to school I would pursue social work or maybe psychology in terms of dealing with the kids.”

“When I dove into this field, I thought I was well-rounded enough, with a little experience from being a mom and grandmother. So it was easy, at first, just to help the kids. Then it started getting rough, you know? It was not all just about mentoring them and helping them with their homework.”

Youth work *is* an art – and as such, only those with passion, patience and people skills need apply. Yet participants often mentioned the technique of youth work – an understanding of child and adolescent development, classroom management strategies, presentation and delivery skills that capture the attention of 40 middle schoolers, and knowledge about how to connect with and

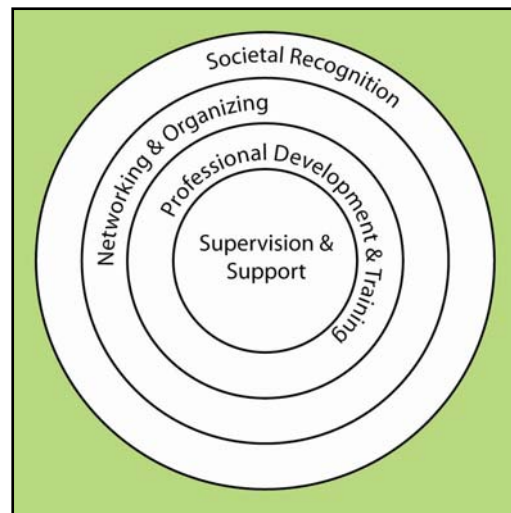
leverage community resources – as important to effective practice. Whether those skills were acquired through formal training (especially pre-service training) or a series of on-the-job supports (formal and informal) varied greatly.

As professionals who want to be seen as more than babysitters, focus group participants – almost across the board—in some way emphasized the importance of professional development. Formal pre-service education (typically a college degree) was valued most for its ability to add texture and context to the work. More participants than not indicated they had some college experience, and many had obtained or were working toward advanced degrees. Most agreed that to effectively remain in the field long-term, they needed to come with, or develop, a broad array of skills. The ability to build good rapport with youth is essential, but being able to write good reports keeps the program doors open. Training and professional development are discussed further in the next section on supports.

Supports for Youth Workers

In the focus groups, youth workers were asked to talk about the level and types of support they receive on the job. The supports youth workers discussed ranged from the concrete – a benefits package, for example – to the more abstract, such as “a boss who understands youth work,” or “being recognized by others.” In analyzing comments made by participants about supports, four general categories emerged, including:

- supervision and support;
- professional development & training;
- networking & organizing; and
- societal recognition.



These four levels can be represented by concentric circles, beginning with agency-level relationships and moving out toward greater community and societal recognition.

Supervision and Support

Focus group reflections about supervision clustered around two ostensibly disparate themes. The first is “my supervisor is supportive.” The second theme suggested a more distant and uninformed supervisory relationship, and can be summed up in this comment from a focus group discussant: “When it comes to some administrators, there’s not as much understanding of exactly what kind of work you do. So they really can’t support us well.”

“In terms of support, my supervisor gives me whatever I need.”

“I feel that the administrator doesn’t really appreciate what I do with the kids or the extent to which I’m working with the kids – that it’s not a 9 to 5 job.”

“I know my supervisor’s hands are tied in a way. She is supporting me the best she can.”

The first theme was reflected in the sentiments of a large number of participants who specifically mentioned having a supportive working relationship with their supervisor. Many fewer participants stated that their supervisors were largely unsupportive.

A vocal minority of youth workers gave their own current or past supervisors low marks for support. In over half of the focus group sessions, statements like, “my supervisor doesn’t know what I actually do,” or “my supervisor doesn’t know what it takes to do my job,” were discussed at length. In a field characterized by ambiguity, lack of pre-service and ongoing training pathways and resources, low wages, and unstable revenue streams; it is not surprising that a significant subset of workers experience poor supervisory support.

A closer read of the dialogue suggests that there are at least some workers who agree with both of the lead statements mentioned earlier: “my supervisor is supportive” and “my supervisor doesn’t know what I actually do.” This suggests a third possible supervisory relationship – one in which autonomy to run programs as the worker sees fit is desired and managers operate within a pseudo-“don’t ask, don’t tell” policy as long as program goals are met and kids appear happy and safe.

In fact, several workers insisted, “there are aspects of the job that no one can help you with,” suggesting it may feel easier to have the elbow room to figure on what works on one’s own. Still other discussants worked in very large agencies, and acknowledged that the decision-making buck does not stop with their direct supervisor. These individuals empathically noted that their supervisors were doing the best they could – under considerable financial and political constraints – to support frontline workers.

Professional Development & Training

Though not considered a panacea, professional development and training were seen as valuable supports for frontline youth workers. Training can provide a much needed context and explanation for the difficult and recurrent issues youth workers encounter on the job. One youth worker reflected,

“What it takes to do this job...”

Youth workers discussed a range of roles, responsibilities and requirements of the job – some that are included in typical job descriptions as well as some unwritten realities of the work. The distance between the “stated” job and the “real” job is sometimes a source of supervisory conflict and a reality that youth workers feel those outside of the field don’t fully appreciate. A sampling of the “requirements” mentioned by youth workers include:

“If I spend less than 60 hours a week working at the job, then it’s a good week, it’s a pretty easy week.”

“To work with the same kids every day you need patience. They have good days and they have bad days. You have to learn how to understand what makes them tick; what makes them go.”

“You have to get down on the ground and play with them and get dirty and run around – you know, get down on their level in order to make that bridge to where they are going to listen to you and respect you.”

“You have to think about boundaries – you know, should they have your cell phone number, or should you hang out with them on the weekends?”

“I’m not their biological father, but somehow, some way through our relationship, we tend to build a relationship that’s more or less child and parent-like. You fall into a role as if you’re a father, big brother, uncle—you’re all these other roles that they don’t have at home.”

“I sometimes feel upper management doesn’t really quite get what all is entailed. They think my job is 3 hours a day being at the school, and it’s a lot more than just 3 hours a day.”

“I buy 90 to 95percent of everything that my program does out of my own pocket because for my program there are no underwriters. There’s no extra funding. So a lot of it, I feel like if my kids are going to get to do anything, I need to do it, so that’s what I do.”

“We have two kids at my program right now that the family situation is just not good, and he and his sister have opened up to several of our staff and have talked about some of the horrendous things that they have had in their lives. All of my staff are working very closely with these two kids to get them in a place where they need to be. And, I mean, that’s what keeps me going back, is because, you know, without us, I don’t know where these two kids would be.”

“I think that youth workers understand that they’re not only signing up a child; they’re signing up their parents. They’re signing up the problems they face when they go back home.”

“I need to learn things that I can’t learn just by working. I like picking up a lot of skills and knowledge as a youth worker.” Several focus group participants stated how helpful this was to them, particularly as novice youth workers.

Whether working within a relatively resource-rich affiliate system or employed by an independent agency with no in-house training unit, youth workers emphatically stated the need for ongoing professional development opportunities. These opportunities provide both much needed validation for the work and the critical lifelines necessary for coping with and responding to the very difficult circumstances of many young people’s lives.

“Before I started, I didn’t have a lot of training. So I was kind of in awe-land for a while. But then, in the first three years, we’ve had all kinds of training. I think I figured we had over 100 hours of training, valuable training.”

Youth workers employed by the local affiliate of a national organization or a government agency seem more likely to have access to in-house training opportunities and resources, as well as supervisor support to attend trainings. Comments about the severe lack of training opportunities typically came from those working in small, independent community-based organizations. Local intermediaries often filled the training gap for these workers (and in a few stated cases, the supervisory gap as well, providing feedback on performance and professional development guidance).

Some discussions focused on the mismatch between available professional development opportunities and the day-to-day requirements of the job, leaving some participants suggesting that training is not all that useful. But even this conclusion was more related to the appropriateness and alignment of training content to actual job competencies than whether training provides any value-added support. “Useful training” appears to include information about such practical concerns as behavioral and classroom management as well as youth development, is example-based rather than prescriptive, move workers beyond basic frameworks for working with youth, and provides peer-based opportunities to learn and share.

Networking & Organizing

Across focus groups, when asked what would help them feel more supported, participants talked about having some kind of organization that would advocate on behalf of youth work professionals and help them get connected to one another. Whether that organization currently exists or is an entity yet to be formed, when it came to describing the infrastructure necessary to advance the field, youth workers described an organization (or, more realistically, a set of organizations) that was equal parts training and resource development intermediary, career counseling agency, credit union, credentialing body or professional association.

Though diverse, each of these functions addresses a real concern in the field. A training and resource development intermediary breaches the gap between the job-related needs of youth workers and the human resources realities of the majority of youth-serving organizations. A credit union might provide the information and infrastructure necessary to provide loan counseling, offer homebuyer’s programs and retirement investment clubs. A credentialing body would provide a range of certifications and university credit programs, raising both the standards and status of the field in the minds’ eye of many youth workers. And a career counseling agency would help individuals weave all of their experiences together into a comprehensive career “whole,” and facilitate more workers finding or building their own career ladder in a relatively undifferentiated field.

“Maybe there can be things organized for youth workers, things like homebuyers programs and incentives. Folks who work in these non-profits don’t make a lot, but also have, you know, home buying dreams or whatever.”

Networking with other youth workers in the trenches emerged as a priority among focus group participants. Discussants emphasized the importance of having regular opportunities to meet and share with others in similar professional situations, suggesting that isolation is an issue for youth workers. Networking provides both affirmation and information that can inspire youth workers to do their jobs better – sources of support which may or may not be present within individual agencies.

The connections youth workers seek not only involve networking amongst themselves, but also connections to other resources related to professional and life management goals – resources that many believe would help more individuals remain in the field. “If only we had an organizing body representing us...” several participants lamented, often directing these comments directly into the recorder’s microphone in an attempt to reach the ears of some unknown entity that might be able to move such things. One youth worker condensed the need in this way: “If there was one body representing youth workers that would help. We really are low-income folks, you know. How can we be exposed to incentives like they have for teachers [e.g., homebuyers and loan forgiveness programs]? How can we get counseling and assistance on financing further education? You know, things that would help us stay in this field.”

“I think just about everyone has touched base on it—networking. I think that’s a necessary tool. We need to start with ourselves. It’s critical and it’s needed, you know? Although we don’t see each other; we’re all over the city and all over the place. Everybody gets a lot of resources through e-mail. I mean, with e-mail, you have access to the world now. So what’s wrong with shooting it out to your colleagues and letting them know, ‘Hey, check out this opportunity. This is coming up, and who know where it may lead you?’”

Societal Recognition

The fourth layer of support youth workers seek relates to broader recognition of the field and a shift in how the work is perceived in society at large. Youth workers’ sense of the way the field is perceived falls into one of two basic categories: The first perception is that people outside of the field view youth workers as babysitters – a professional “slap in the face” to those who see their chosen work involving much more than keeping kids safe and occupied.

“I think a lot of times people don’t realize what we do. They think that I just have the easiest job ever—that I just go and play with a bunch of kids for 3 hours and get paid for it. And I’m like, ‘No, you don’t understand.’ So I think, on the other hand, a lot of people—I mean, if they would come in one day and just sit back and watch, they would be like, ‘Oh, my gosh.’ Cause it’s amazing what we have to go through sometimes.”

Sometimes this perception comes from parents, a particularly disappointing source of frustration. Several youth workers expressed anger with parents that treat them like cheap babysitters – with little respect and even less appreciation for the role they play in shaping their children’s development.

The “cheap babysitter” perception, among others, is one reason many youth workers suspect it is hard to explain the full value of youth work to the community and funders alike, and this definitely hurts the field’s ability to advance.

“I think it’s a bad stigma, because I just graduated last year from college. And it was almost hard to say I was going to be a youth worker. I was like embarrassed. I’m not going to be an engineer. I’m not going to be some fancy job. Why is that fancy? We are building people. This is the most important profession in the world, and we’re looked down upon.”

Some participants pointed out that the “babysitter” perception is not the only perception of the field, and that not all perceptions are negative. A few even joked that they are seen as the “Mother Teresa” of their friends and family. Many of those who work closely with youth workers – teachers,

principals, social workers, parents, and funders – express tremendous respect for the work. One youth worker reflected, “I think we gain respect as people watch us do our job. I invited parents to see the program one night, and I did it just so they would see what our group leaders deal with. When they saw what we do with the kids, they were like, ‘Ohh!’ So I think you gain respect because these are the things that they don’t have time to do with the kids anymore. We do it.”

So once folks “get it,” many youth workers feel a tremendous amount of individual respect. But the field is not known en masse, and changing perceptions one-person-at-a-time is not enough to affect the pressing issues participants are concerned about such as compensation and professional growth. This is the dilemma that they see: In the grand scheme of things, the field is basically invisible.

It seems that the efforts, talents and contributions youth workers make to society fly under the radar, if others’ reaction to the profession is any gauge. Casual conversation at a class or family reunion sometimes leads to polite silence when one mentions what they do. According to many participants, the profession doesn’t register highly on the prestige meter. Others say their parents and family members are proud of them, but still have a hard time classifying their job into a career category. This sometimes means youth workers must deflect questions about when they are going to get started on their “real” career.

“I think once you go into detail about what it is, people are always like, “Wow! That’s great! Like I didn’t know there was that kind of stuff out there.”

Youth work jobs do not even register on the internet. Try a Google search for youth work jobs, several focus group participants challenged, and perhaps you will get \$7 - \$8 an hour childcare listings – hardly the wage (or the career) that most of the participants, particularly those with a bachelor’s degree or above, are hoping for. All of these experiences tell youth workers that they are invisible as a profession and fuel their desire for broader recognition.

“I’d also say from the experience of looking for a job, that when you’re trying to find something in youth work, when you look on a job search engine, there is nothing for youth work. You know it’s out there and obviously there are people in the field, but to try and find something like that through normal job search channels? I think small things like that make it so that it does not legitimize it as a career and makes it so that people don’t really know about it.”

Many focus group participants believe that broader recognition of the profession will lead to broader community support and increased funding for the work they do. Some youth workers suggest that the field could benefit from better branding – a way for those inside the field to communicate the value and nature of the work to those outside of it. There is also support for credentialing, but with several important caveats. Many youth workers see the regulation of and respect for the field that credentialing might bring, but want to proceed cautiously for two reasons.

First, youth workers do not want credentialing to “lock out” talented people who do not have access to formal higher education. Many feel that the best youth workers are not necessarily the best educated, and they do not want the field to lose those individuals with a natural affinity for it. The second warning is rooted in the concern that credentialing requirements may not match the resource realities of the field; in other words, credentialing may be putting the resource cart before the horse. If individuals get credentialed, will the field be able to respond in kind with salary increases, career ladder opportunities, and greater stability among organizations?

“That’s why this trend towards professionalizing youth work is a very bad trend. ‘Cause objectively what it means in practice is that Northwestern University will have a Department of Youth Work, and they’ll be recruiting kids from the suburbs, with very little gut understanding of these neighborhoods, to come and become youth workers.”

The four concentric circles of support discussed in this section – supervision and support, professional development and training, networking and organizing, and societal recognition – all represent important areas for workforce policy development. But what about compensation? Are youth workers unconcerned about pay? Almost every focus group participant would answer “No!” Indeed, compensation concerns came up in *every* focus group and – with rare exception – most every participant lamented both their own wage level and the compensation status of the field in general.

We treat compensation separately here for two reasons: First, over the course of the focus group dialogues it often came up separate from the other issues of support, and oddly enough, in more than half of the discussions, the facilitator had to specifically bring it up. Perhaps because it is a sensitive issue for group discussion, or perhaps because low compensation is for many a foregone conclusion. Once the floodgates were open, however, strong opinions emerged.

Second, if we were to turn back to the concentric circles and think about compensation in relation to how the focus group discussions unfolded, it becomes increasingly apparent that compensation issues cut across the four circles rather than comprise a fifth. Actions designed to influence professional development, organizing or advocacy, for example – will likely have implications for compensation, and once movement occurs in any of those four spheres, the issue of compensation will follow closely behind.

Not in it for the Money, but...

Though admittedly not well-compensated, the majority of focus group participants led with the sentiment that they really enjoy the work. Maybe this is why in over half of the groups, the facilitator had to make specific mention of compensation before moving on to the next topic. This initial dearth of discussion about compensation should not be interpreted as lack of concern over wages. In fact, there is a great deal of “wage talk” in youth worker circles – often in the context of cathartic humor.

“This is a rewarding career. And I think more people would choose this profession if it was more stable and paid more. I think more people that were going to be teachers would choose to this profession. But the pay is usually below average. So I think that is one of the reasons why it's hard to find people to choose this career above others.”

Compensation Does Not Reflect Value of the Work

“Anybody who’s doing actual real good doesn’t ever really get paid enough for what they’re doing,” stated one youth worker, reflecting the group sentiment. Typically it took only one person to respond to a facilitator’s question about compensation to elicit a round of “Ditto’s” and “Amen’s.” Workers feel compensation rates do not reflect the value of the work, yet they enjoy the work and consider it more fulfilling than better-compensated options. The pay issue is a source of internal tension for many youth workers who question, to varying degrees, the feasibility of staying in the field long-term.

Three specific themes emerged during discussions of compensation. The first is that youth workers believe their wages will remain essentially flat regardless of how long they remain in the field. Many talked about being okay with a low starting wage, but wish the field did a better job of calibrating wage increases to years of service and rewarding longevity. Several veteran youth workers resent the fact that moving into management appears to be the only option for making any “real money.” One frustrated youth worker commented, “I don’t want to be an administrator.

That’s not what I’m good at. I’m good at designing programs. I’m good at helping the youth. But I’m never going to be able to make over \$30,000.”

Others assumed the attitude of “I’m not in it for the money,” appearing to imply that getting too focused on compensation was an unproductive use of energy.

A second theme that arose was a concern for hourly workers. Hourly workers were seen as particularly poorly paid, and, in some cases, poorly treated. Seven to eight dollars an hour appears to be a typical hourly wage, and benefits are often not part of the package.

“It’s fine—for a second income.”

“The money would be nice, but you go into this job knowing that’s not there.”

For at least some of the part-time, hourly workers in the focus groups, supervision can be spotty and interactions with supervisors condescending. For full- and part-time, hourly and salaried workers, recognition for day-to-day efforts in what can be a tough job appears hit-or-miss.

Benefits emerged as a third theme, though mentioned less frequently. Benefits appear to either be adequate or lousy to non-existent. A fair share of this benefits picture can be explained by the large percentage of part-time workers, who often receive no benefits. However, the part-time workforce does not explain the entire picture, as some full-time workers also struggle with the adequacy of benefits. The situation is made even harder as individuals who already face low wages have to spend more out-of-pocket to maintain whatever benefits they do have.

“I’m blessed to have benefits.”

Stress Makers and Breakers: A Day in the Life

Stress is a part of the daily life of youth workers. Most focus group participants do this work with hard to reach populations or in economically disadvantaged areas. Yet by and large, discussions of stress only touched lightly on the challenges of working with kids in difficult circumstances.

Stressors that did receive a great deal of attention were things like difficult working relationships and poor communication, workload and a lack of balance between work and personal life, and unrealistic expectations around programmatic deliverables. An additional stressor is lack of job security – a reality that is exacerbated by how funding streams operate, causing many agencies to delay guaranteeing staff positions for the coming fiscal year.

Supervisors Set a Tone – Colleagues Keep You Sane

It appears that the supervisor role can make or break the working experience. If the supervisor is supportive and knows how to bring in the resources needed to do the work, youth workers feel free to do their job well. When supervisors lack these qualities, it shows up in higher turnover, less effective programming, more internal conflicts and greater worker dissatisfaction. A number of discussants said that their colleagues had the biggest influence on their feelings of support on the job and their longevity.

“I think if it wasn’t for the support of my co-workers, I probably would’ve walked out the door a long time ago.”

One discussant reflected, “The biggest support I feel is within the building, with our staff, because everyone is here, you know, for the same reason. Everyone has a passion for seeing growth within the youth and the community.”

Job Security

Youth workers expressed a lot of concern about long-term job security. Job security is linked to organizational finances. Many describe an annual “nail-biting” season – the time when they wait out funding decisions that will determine their program’s fate. Given this sense of insecurity it is striking how many focus group participants have remained in the field, and even within their organizations, for several years. There does appear to be a psychological toll for some workers who must often wait until only weeks before a new season begins to be assured that the money will be there to pay them. Staff in nationally affiliated organizations may experience less stress related to program stability issues because of support their organizations have been able to garner through national fundraising efforts.

“I think job security is one thing that would keep me in this. Just liking it and loving what you do isn’t always enough.”

Balance

Achieving work-life balance is an increasingly difficult task for workers across professions. Youth work is no exception and in fact, may present exceptional challenges in this area. Many people pointed to a built-in balance buster – the necessity to work into the evening hours and on weekends because that is when young people are available. Many youth workers regularly work both evenings and weekends and still hit the office doors by 9am to do their administrative and program planning work. One participant summed up his difficulties in achieving balance in this way: “I’ve worked with community-based organizations, and they do tax you out in terms of wanting you to work. And I don’t have a problem with that, but I think that compromise is important, too. In other words, it’s a tradeoff. So if the organization says, ‘You’re gonna work Saturdays’ or ‘You’ve got to go to this special activity on Saturday,’ what’s the harm in allowing that person to come in later on Monday or take Monday off?”

“It’s not a job that you can really have, like, if you want to be a mom.”

Turnover

Turnover is seen as a barrier to achieving youth outcomes, but also has an impact on workers. Turnover appears to affect those who stay in two ways. First, it creates programmatic turmoil for staff. Just when it appears staff are working together well to run a smooth program, someone leaves. Several discussants pointed out that it is hard to achieve institutional memory and program consistency when the staff is constantly turning over. A second effect is that remaining staff members feel pressure not to leave. One youth worker reflected, “It gets really hard, too. The kids say, ‘Jennifer was here, and then when Jennifer left the program wasn’t that good for a long time.’ So I’m here, but with her leaving, they’re saying, ‘You’re not going, are you?’ ‘Cause Jennifer just left.’ ‘If you leave, that’s it – I’m not coming back.’”

“Yeah, sometimes you kind of get guilted into staying. Then you stay longer than you intended at a particular job.”

Staying, Leaving and Torn

As discussions moved on to youth workers’ long-term plans, it became clear that decisions to stay or leave the field come with a bit of turmoil for many. On the surface, the choice for the majority of discussants was clear-cut – they are staying. A smaller sub-set are leaving – for better pay, most often, or because they had never intended to stay in the first place (several were college students looking to stake their claim in the wider work world upon graduation) And among both stayers and leavers, many individuals expressed feeling torn.

Staying

It feels worth repeating that most people who participated in the study intend to stay in this field.⁵ People stay because they are committed to the kids. They stay because they prefer the informal atmosphere of the work to corporate culture. They stay because youth work is what they do well. They stay because they've logged in enough years that, at this point, leaving would represent a 180-degree life course change and they don't know what else they would do. Many are committed for life.

"I like my job, and I couldn't see myself doing anything else for money. As much as I would like to go somewhere and make big dollars, I like working with the kids. And that's going to keep me in the field for a long time."

That a solid core of individuals intends to stay is good news for any field, and especially for youth work. But in listening to the discussions, it is clear that staying comes at a price. The biggest price people pay is that of long-term earning potential. Several youth workers specifically commented that they are staying, but that the money issue nags at them. Youth workers have home buying dreams, kids to put through college, and retirement worries. And the compensation rates within the field do not align with those goals – at least not without consideration of a second job or, perhaps, the support of a spouse working in a more lucrative field.

One youth worker, firmly in the “staying” group, came back to: “It’s a vocation for me, something that calls me. So I know I’m going to be in this field for the rest of my life. Now the challenge is, okay, well then, how can I also buy a house? I’m at the point now where I know that I want to stay in youth work, but how creative am I going to have to be to find a position that will pay me what I’m worth?”

“What’s keeping me in youth work is the youth. Not only that, I think the kids see a lot of turnover with youth workers. And so if someone leaves, I go, ‘Well, I’m not leaving.’ So then, you just stay for them. But then you think, ‘Well, at what expense do I stay for them?’”

Leaving

Though few individuals in the focus groups spoke of plans to leave, in those cases, money was the main reason they pointed to. One participant said he was the breadwinner in his family, and that leaving was simply the financially responsible thing to do. Another person talked about wanting to be able to afford some “extras” in life, although the extras she described were relatively modest, including things like retirement savings and the ability to go on a nice vacation once a year.

“After watching this go on for five years, watching the turnover at our agency, I think somebody needs to recognize that if they paid more in this field, they would get people to stick with it. I think about the amount of turnover, and think, do people consider this a career?”

For others, compensation in and of itself was not the lead concern, but personal career advancement was. The advancement ceiling in youth work – for them – was too low, and without clear guidance on where they might go next, they figure the only way *through* that ceiling is *out*. One person talked about leaving without leaving: “I would say that I’m *not* leaving the field. I would leave my job, of course, to work probably as a teacher. But I would stay in the same field – keep working with youth, but probably doing something different.”

Others reminded the group that it was always their intention to just pass through. Youth work provided a great launching pad into other careers like teaching or child psychology, or served as

⁵ Though we believe the focus group participants’ views are reasonably reflective of a larger youth worker population, we must assume some selection bias. The individuals who chose to participate in focus groups may be more invested in the profession than the general population. Illinois survey data suggests that at least 30 percent of youth workers intend to stay five or more years, 30 percent plan to leave within five years, and many are unsure of their plans.

an anchor to keep people grounded as they went on to pursue PhDs or enter the corporate workforce, worlds away from the realities of youth work.

Torn

“I love the job...but I can’t live off it” is the sentiment that best sums up the “torn” position. Over and over, participants came to a common refrain – the work simply doesn’t pay enough over the span of a lifetime to ensure they can meet even modest goals – owning a home, paying for a child’s college, retiring in relative comfort. Making \$25,000 is all well and good when you are 25 with no dependents and it’s “all about the kids,” but ten years, a spouse and two kids later, questions of financial feasibility creep in. And 20 years later, it doesn’t look like the retirement savings will quite be enough. One youth worker in her late thirties remarked, “My mother is always asking how much I have saved. And I sort of dodge that conversation. Certainly, from day to day, I can pay my bills. But it does occur to me that, if something were to happen, I’m in a lot of trouble. I’m blessed to have benefits and I have health insurance – but there is no savings.”

Others are torn because they feel it is too difficult to navigate a career in this field. It is difficult to progress, financially or professionally, without job-hopping. And many ultimately leave the field or sit at its periphery in order to advance in their careers. One discussant commented, “That is a challenge with this work, in general. They want people who have degrees, but then the jobs are so terminal. You cannot progress unless you leave that agency. And that’s kind of frustrating because some people are leaving the field only because there’s no next [position].” Youth work may be a particularly terminal career choice for rural workers who have fewer employment options.

“Youth development is always going to attract people who want to work with young people. But how do you retain people right here in the middle who want to do this work? We also want to make a living.”

Many of the focus group participants are attempting to build the next rung of a career ladder because they intend to stay in the field. How viable a field is it? And what would it take to support the field to be strong and viable in the future? These questions were exactly what the interviewers posed to focus group discussants.

Building the Profession: Perspectives & Options

As discussions began to close, focus group participants wanted to make it known that youth work is a viable profession. There is a lot of pride around being a youth worker. One participant emphatically replied, “Is the field *viable*? I wish that I could understand the legitimacy of the question, because it’s actually a ridiculous question when you think about it. You’re saying, is this career, is it professional, or could it be a viable career? We just told you, it’s not a career; it’s a calling. And if it lasts the rest of our lives, then I guess you could call it a career.”

The majority of discussants saw youth work as an honorable profession and a commendable career choice worthy of greater support. With practical considerations having already surfaced, in many conversations the viability issue was less about economics and more about pride. Having come to terms with their personal decision, the challenge now, several youth

“Actually, I’m looking forward to it being a career. The possibilities are great! I had a career in engineering, that’s what I used to do. I have this continuous need to keep educating myself, so I’m really looking forward to the development of more degree or certification programs.”

workers commented, is to get the rest of the world to recognize the profession. And youth workers admit that is a big challenge indeed.

A small cohort (typically part-timers) entered the discussions not believing youth work was a viable profession, but the experience of the focus group alone changed many of their minds. One such participant reflected, “That question about career is an interesting one. I always looked at it as just a job, to be totally honest. This focus group is just making things a lot clearer. Thank you. It’s helped me out a lot, to really think about, do I want to make this a career?”

“I see it being a career. I think one thing is getting other people to see it as a career. You know, we are not halfway between babysitters and teachers. There’s a whole different role [in this work]. And it’s important work.”

Youth Worker Reflections on Building the Profession

What do focus group participants think it takes to build a strong, viable youth work field? Throughout the discussions, youth workers provided input on a range of levers they think would move the profession forward. Here we highlight the options and opportunities they raised.

Flexible & Creative Recruitment

- Youth workers value the fact that there are a range of entry points into the profession. A youth worker might start their career as a volunteer, be recruited as a young person to mentor their peers, or enter after completing a bachelor’s or master’s degree. While more clarity about how to enter would be useful, youth workers expressed a desire to maintain a diverse range of entry points into the work and view the diversity of backgrounds and entry points as strengths.
- Volunteerism may be a unique avenue for entering and receiving a hands-on understanding of the field. Whether a college intern gets inspired by the kids or a mom volunteering a few hours in after-school finds a viable option to return to the workforce, the volunteer pool appears to be a place from which employers can draw new workers. Finding better ways to intentionally leverage the volunteer force for the future development of youth work might be a worthwhile collective pursuit for the field.

Incentives for Every Career Stage

- Youth workers are interested in having the profession be considered an attractive option for young adults just entering the workforce. Incentives to attract and retain younger workers might include loan forgiveness or college assistance and career guidance, in addition to targeted recruitment strategies on college campuses and other venues where young people might be.
- Different incentives will be needed to attract mid-career workers, but addressing these needs could make coming to and staying in the field a more viable option. Mid-career incentives might focus on financial planning and professional growth concerns, including homebuyers’ seminars, retirement counseling, ongoing professional development and continuing education opportunities (for management and non-management tracks), in addition to other outlets for professional growth.

Compensation that Rewards Continuity & Longevity

- In discussing compensation, youth workers suggested more should be done to reward longevity in the field. Several references to teacher pay scales and career options suggest that youth workers would welcome more cross-field compensation comparisons between youth work and related professions. One specific compensation issue relates to

strengthening the link between pay rates and longevity, and addressing the financial concerns of those who wish to remain in direct service roles yet still grow in the field. Focus group participants were consistent in noting that addressing compensation is important to reducing turnover.

Stable Career Ladders and Expanded Opportunities

- The rungs of the career ladder for youth workers are shaky at best, and many suggest that building a career in the field is more akin to jumping from one ladder to another than scaling a single ladder with rungs that are firmly connected to one another. Metaphors aside, youth workers suggest that in order to be more responsive to the needs of those seeking to make a career in youth work, expanding opportunities for networking and training and offering credentialing programs that align with the realities of the field are important strategies.

Membership and Recognition

- Another support strategy raised by youth workers was the idea of an organizational entity of some kind charged with both supporting employee needs on the job but also broader advocacy efforts for the profession. While some raised unions as an example, others talked about an association model that could serve as a one-stop resource shop for youth workers' needs.
- Finally, in addition to recognition within their own ranks, youth workers want to get the field into the mainstream and elevate public awareness of the profession and its contributions to society.

These data paint a picture of a diverse profession characterized by diverse work experiences and varied aspirations. Flexibility in terms of entry into the field is valued by youth workers. In fact youth work may be the best kept secret for people who want to work with kids, but, for a variety of reasons, do not become teachers – offering more flexibility in terms of entry, focus and location. At the same time, youth workers appear stymied by low starting wages, flat-lined compensation packages, and uncertain career paths.

Any workforce has to figure out how to attract, recruit and retain high performing individuals based on some unique mix of required credentials and competencies, compensation packages, and career options. We hope this report provides helpful insights into the minds and hearts of youth workers, as well as some practical ideas, from their perspectives, about what motivates, supports, and sustains them in this important work.

APPENDIX A

The Next Generation Coalition Youth Work Coalition

The Next Generation Youth Work Coalition (Next Gen) is a direct outgrowth of an invitational meeting held at Wingspread in November 2004 that brought national and local leaders together from the after-school and youth work arenas. Next Gen is comprised of the leadership within both national and local capacity-building and intermediary organizations, youth worker associations and nationally-affiliated youth-serving organizations. The goal of Next Gen is to achieve its vision of a stable, prepared, supported workforce that is committed to the positive development of young people.

At the Wingspread meeting, members of the nascent Next Gen Coalition identified four critical steps needed to create a stable, prepared, supported and committed workforce:

- Using and developing knowledge;
- Engaging the field;
- Building consensus and agendas;
- Implementing change.

In June 2005, Cornerstones for Kids provided Next Gen with its first official grant to engage national, state and local networks in an ambitious, one-year data collection effort to answer three questions about the individuals who work day-to-day with young people in school and community based youth organizations and out-of-school time activities:

- What does the youth work workforce look like?
- How are youth work professionals supported in the workplace?
- What needs to be done to improve the situations of youth work professionals?

These questions went to the heart of a discussion about attracting, developing and sustaining the youth work workforce that began at the 2004 Wingspread meeting. They also speak to serious data gaps identified by Cornerstones for Kids, formed in 2004 to improve the organizations that provide vulnerable children with supports and services in order to improve outcomes for these children and their families.

The growing knowledge base about the youth work workforce is a direct outgrowth of a series of grants made by Cornerstones for Kids to national and local organizations affiliated with the Next Gen Coalition. Equally important, these efforts provided the *raison d'être* that helped solidify both the mission and the composition of the Coalition:

- Prioritizing questions about the workforce;
- Bringing national after-school and youth development organizations together;
- Development of common data collection instruments;
- Ongoing engagement of local intermediaries and front-line workers; and
- Generating interest in targeted workforce issues within the youth work workforce.

For more information or to join the Coalition, email Pam Garza of the National Collaboration for Youth, at pam@naassembly.org.

APPENDIX B

SUMMARY CHART ON FOCUS GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

Group Number	Locality ⁶	Participants	School-based ⁷	Community-based	Serve Elementary School	Serve Middle School	Serve High School
1	Rockford (Urban)	12	12 (100%)	2 (16.7%)	12 (100%)	0	0
2	Chicago (Urban)	8	1 (12.5%)	8 (100%)	7 (88%)	8 (100%)	5 (63.5%)
3	Chenoa, Dwight, Pontiac, Fairburg (Rural)	9	0	100%	9 (100%)	9 (100%)	7 (77.8%)
4	Round Lake (Rural)	9	2 (22.2%)	7 (87.8%)	1 (11.1%)	4 (44.4%)	9 (100%)
5	Jacksonville, S. Jacksonville, Beardstown, Alexander, Bluffs, Greene County (Rural)	13	3 (23.1%)	11 (84.6%)	12 (92.3%)	4 (30.8%)	2 (15.4%)
6	Chicago (Urban)	9	1 (12.5%)	7 (87.5%)	4 (44.4%)	3 (33.3%)	7 (77.8%)
7	Belleville, Carbondale, Gallatin County (Rural)	9	3 (33.3%)	6 (66.7%)	7 (77.8%)	8 (88.9%)	6 (66.7%)
8	Chicago (Urban)	14	11 (79%)	4 (28.6%)	3 (21.4%)	4 (28.6%)	14 (100%)
Total	43 Urban(51.8)/ 40 Rural (48.2)	83	33 (40.7%)	54 (66.7%)	55 (66.3%)	40 (48.2%)	50 (60.2%)

⁶ Rural was defined as a locality with a population of 40,000 or fewer people.

⁷ Total percentages within category may equal to more than 100 percent because some youth workers work across settings or work with multiple age populations.

APPENDIX C

Frontline Youth Worker Focus Group Questions

Entry into the Field

1) Let's start our discussion talking about your entry into the field. What brought you to this work and why?

What other kinds of work did you do previously?

What kind of educational background do you have?

Why did you decide to do this kind of work?

Were you a participant in a youth program as a child or teen? Did you volunteer?

Support on the Job/Job Satisfaction

2) We now want to talk about your job satisfaction as a youth worker. How supported do you feel in your job?

When you started working with kids, did you feel prepared?

What kind of training/professional development opportunities do you wish you had to prepare for this job? What kind do you feel you need now?

Do you feel you are well compensated for this work (not just salary but benefits, working conditions, recognition, etc.)?

How satisfied are you overall with your decision to do youth work?

Retention

3) What has kept you doing this work for as long as you have?

How long do you think you will stay in this field?

What makes you want to go to work? What is motivating about this field?

If you think you're going to leave the field soon, why would you be deciding to leave?

What factors would most influence your decision to stay or leave?

Youth Work as a Career

4) Finally, we are interested in your thoughts of youth work as a profession. Based on your experiences, do you consider this a viable career?

How do you refer to the kind of work you do – what do you call it?

Do you see what you are doing as a career?

Do you feel like that youth work is a legitimate profession or field?

How do others (e.g. your friends and family) perceive your work?

Wrap-Up

5) Is there anything else at this point that anyone would like to add, that you felt was not discussed during our session?