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FAST FACTS

September 30, 2010

Meeting the Needs of Youth: Perspectives from Youth-Serving Agencies

On Wednesday, September 29th the CCPA–MB launched its latest report at the Freight House. The launch was part of a one-day conference entitled “Building Positive Relationships” organized by the Coalition of Community-Based Youth-Serving Agencies (CCBYSA).

The CCBYSA is a network of 18 after-school and community-based agencies that work together to provide high quality programming and services to support at-risk and marginalized youth (ranging in ages from 6 to 29) in Winnipeg. The network includes: Art City, Boys and Girls Clubs of Winnipeg, Broadway Neighbourhood Centre, Graffiti Art Programming, Indian Métis Friendship Centre, IRCOM, KYAC, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, NEEDS Inc, Ndinawemaaganag, Endawaad, MYAC, Resource Assistance For Youth, Rossbrook House, Spence Neighbourhood Association, Teen Stop Jeunesse, West Broadway Youth Outreach, West Central Community Program, and YMCA-YWCA Winnipeg.

The CCPA report “Meeting the Needs of Youth” draws upon interviews with CCBYSA front-line workers and administrators to address two questions: *What are the issues that youth in Winnipeg face? What are the difficulties youth-serving*

agencies encounter when helping the populations of youth they serve?

With regard to the issues that youth in Winnipeg currently face, the topic of youth gangs featured prominently in the interviews. Rather than locating this issue in *individualized* terms—that is, that youth are ‘choosing’ to join gangs, and are individually responsible for their gang affiliation—youth workers were clear in situating youth gangs within a *broader, systemic context*: children and young people are doing the best they can in the face of structurally rooted troubles largely beyond their control, including poverty, family problems, difficulties in school, lack of employment opportunities, and racism and discrimination. These troubles are rarely neatly packaged; they are intersecting issues that cannot be addressed in isolation.

Youth-serving agencies in Winnipeg offer a wide range of services and programs to help youth deal with these issues. Regardless of their respective programs, when asked about their agency’s greatest achievement, youth service workers typically answer that their real success is in offering youth *a place where they feel they belong*. As such, youth-serving agencies do much more than offer programs such as recreation, skill



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development, and job training. They are providing a place for youth to remain attached to pro-social and supportive networks that are otherwise missing from their lives.

When asked about the difficulties youth-serving agencies encounter when helping youth, respondents identified *reaching and retaining some youth in need* and *securing adequate funding* as the biggest challenges they face. With regard to the former, consistency, both in terms of the program schedules and expectations from youth, is crucial for helping these youth. With regard to the latter, respondents underscored that because the issues youth face are so complex, they cannot be adequately addressed without the support and the participation of the wider community—including government. However, the current funding structure that involves a shift away from core funding to a project funding model affects an agency's ability to confront and change the realities youth live in.

A number of insights have emerged from this study with regard to the particular challenges faced by youth-serving agencies in meeting the needs of youth:

Gangs are not the Real Issue: The public perception of youth—and the social policies designed to address their troubles—need to be aligned with what those who work closely with youth understand all too well: we need to ensure that youth can access the resources that will enable them to live productive and meaningful lives.

Connecting Youth to Their Communities: It takes a commitment on behalf of *everyone* in a community to encourage and present opportunities for youth to be recognized as valued members of society. Youth-serving agencies are well-positioned to support youth and help to make this connection

to the wider community, for example, through access to volunteer or employment opportunities and mentorships or skill development training. Strengthening and building upon these connections would go a long way toward meeting the needs of youth.

Providing Youth-Serving Agencies with Sufficient Core Funding: More long-term core funding is required to reduce the variability and unpredictability of relying on project funding so that complex social issues that youth face can be addressed in a way that is both preventative in the long run and beneficial to the lives of youth now.

Advocating for Youth: In Winnipeg, the Coalition of Community-Based Youth Serving Agencies offers an excellent platform for not only advocating for the needs of individual youth but also targeting the change that is needed on a broader, more structural level—both in terms of helping with the issues youth face and the struggles agencies encounter in accessing funding.

Poverty is at the root of so many of the troubles encountered by youth. But the work being undertaken by these youth-serving agencies has demonstrated that solutions are available - and they are working. It *is* possible to build a safe and equitable community.

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