



Positive Youth Environments are Inclusive

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Caring communities are invested in the well-being of ALL youths, especially those who are most likely to face challenges. This includes out-of-home youths in foster care, youths who are runaways, and youths in juvenile detention facilities, as well as youths of color, poor youths, lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youths, and youths with disabilities or disabling conditions.

- Youths with disabilities or special education needs often receive inadequate services. An estimated 10.7% of children age 18 or younger have disabilities (*Disabilities Statistics Center, 1998*).

In 2001 more than 600,000 students with disabilities were taught by unqualified special educators (*American Youth Policy Forum, 2002*).

Social workers in schools and other settings work with and advocate for the needs of youths with disabilities. Programs and policy initiatives aimed at increasing quantity and quality of services are essential in ensuring the equitable treatment of youths with disabilities.

- Non-English-speaking youths encounter significant challenges in health and well-being. The percentage of youths with difficulties in English

has nearly doubled over the past 20 years, increasing from 2.8% in 1979 to 5% in 1999 (*Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2001*).

Expanded community-based and culturally appropriate services can improve health outcomes for youths as well as their opportunities for academic and employment success.

- Although the data are variable, there are an estimated 1 million to 1.3 million homeless and runaway youths (*Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2001*).

Comprehensive models of service that address the immediate and long-term needs of homeless youths can improve outcomes (*Bass, 1992*).

- Youths who are “aging out” of the foster care systems often experience difficulties in acquiring needed health and mental

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health services. A 1998 study indicated that nearly 44% of these young people had difficulty securing health services, and only 21% were able to continue with mental health services they were receiving before leaving foster care (*Child Welfare League of America, 1998*).

The extension of services and Medicaid benefits for youths from 18 to 21 who are in transition can increase health and well-being by providing care for critical needs while allowing youths to focus on successful transitions into their communities.

- Youths of color are overrepresented among those in poverty. They share a disproportionate burden of death and disease. **Broad-based policies and programs such as the National Initiative to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health by 2010 address barriers faced by people and youths of color and help to eradicate disparities in health status.**

References

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Community Checklist

- Adequate and safe shelter and emergency services for runaway or homeless youths
- Integrated educational, employment, health care, and social service systems for out-of-home youths
- Community-based, youth-oriented service centers (drop-in centers)
- Availability of safe and appropriate foster care placements for youths not connected to stable family systems
- Adequate transitional care programs for youths who may be aging out of foster care systems or moving from juvenile detention centers
- Educational, employment, and other social support programs for teenage mothers and fathers
- Training for all professionals working with youths and policies related to the fair treatment of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) youths
- Available counseling services that are confidential and youth friendly
- Implementation of cultural competence standards across all professions working with youths
- Accessible translation services for non-English-speaking youths and their families
- Qualified and adequate staffing for youths requiring special education, physical therapy, or other specialized services
- Integrated and equitable opportunities for physically challenged youths, out-of-home youths, and the like, to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, or tutoring
- Effective policies relating to disparities, discrimination, and mechanisms of accountability in service provision
- Structured training, educational and employment options for youths not in school

Tips on Things You Can Do

- Become involved in coalitions or special interest groups that represent the unique needs of youths.
- Advocate for macro-level change on issues such as antipoverty campaigns, discrimination, and other social justice issues.
- Partner with other disciplines such as the media, community, the legal profession, and school personnel to establish systems and continuity of care for displaced youths.
- Implement outreach programs at churches and in various community settings aimed at increasing the number of families available to serve as foster home placements.
- Work with youths in identifying ways to provide effective and confidential services.
- Introduce training curricula to colleagues on creating healthy environments for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths.
- Conduct workshops on NASW's *Standards for Cultural Competency in Social Work Practice*.
- Organize a task force to address decision makers about the service needs and concerns of disenfranchised populations of youths and policy provisions for extended services.
- Include diverse perspectives of youths in information developed and disseminated.