

PREPARING YOUTH FOR ADULTHOOD:
A REVIEW OF THE BALTIMORE YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES SYSTEM

By

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“I want them (the youth) to know that someone cares, so they can open up. The main focus is to get them educated then they will succeed. If you can know your power, then you will understand that the only person that can stop you is you. They must realize that they can take charge.”

--Bryant Payne (Westside Center Employment Advocate)

Executive Summary

Every day urban teens attend high school interested in learning and hoping to connect to positive opportunities. They hope to find schools well equipped and ready to accept them and qualified teachers who care about them and challenge their curious minds. Unfortunately, while some youth connect to these opportunities, many others unfortunately do not, because all too often, the systems in which they are participating, have failed them. This is especially true for urban youth who live in tough neighborhoods, like Baltimore’s Empowerment Zone. Besides the educational system, other institutions such as the family, the community, and other social and economic services have failed to provide inner city youth with positive and supportive structures that will ensure their successful transition to adulthood.

Life in Baltimore’s Empowerment Zone is especially difficult with high unemployment, high crime rates, teen pregnancy, increasing high school drop out rates, and a lack of services and supports in the neighborhoods. In 1993, President William Clinton designated specific census tract areas as empowerment zones and enterprise communities based on the numbers of people living with incomes considerably below the poverty line. As a benefit to these community designations, these impoverished areas received tax benefits and business development incentives to help reestablish services, supports and economic development.

One of the federally supported programs specifically designed for youth in Baltimore’s Empowerment Zone is the Youth Opportunities Grant, locally referred to as the Baltimore Youth Opportunities System or YO! Baltimore. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), in collaboration

with the federal Office of Youth Services, developed an incentive for youth practitioners and workforce professionals to pair up to develop a comprehensive set of services and supports for all youth who live in the Empowerment Zone (EZ) regardless of income.

With a well-structured proposal of comprehensive services and supports for both in-school and out-of-school youth, as well as community partnerships in the educational and employment sectors and on-site social services addressing the mental and physical health needs of the youth, the Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED) in Baltimore submitted a winning application to the DOL and in March 2000, was awarded a \$44 million grant to establish its ambitious system. In the first year, \$11 million was provided for the startup, including the establishment of contracts with community centers to house the youth services, human resources, including staff hiring and training, the development and structuring of contracts with educational and employment partners and youth outreach and recruitment. The Westside Community Center, which had been previously established under a short-term demonstration grant, was strengthened with additional staff, services and activities for youth. Within three months it opened its doors in compliance with the requirements of the grant. In the following year, another large center located at the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Center (HEBCAC), was established as well as three smaller satellite centers throughout the city's EZ.

The purpose of this graduate project is to describe the structure and function of the Baltimore Youth Opportunities (YO!) System, describe the need for such a system in the Baltimore EZ and show the profound impact this system has had personally and professionally on the youth and staff. As well, an interesting observation emerged during the project fieldwork. This system also provides a family-like structure to thousands of youth who rely on the

encouragement, stability and support of the caring adult staff who set their expectations of success high. In addition, youth not only meet these expectations but are doing this while facing other pressures as young adults, such as crowded schools and lack of personal attention by teachers, peer pressure to keep up with expensive fashion and fads, drugs and fast money influences, teen pregnancy and lack of familial support. Despite these pressures on the youth, I have seen their strength and resiliency, as the Baltimore Youth Opportunities System holistically supports them in their attempts to successfully transition to adulthood.

Methodology

My research consisted of reviewing various youth development reports and publications, and conducting interviews with YO! Baltimore staff and youth. To obtain the insider perspective on the operation of YO! Baltimore, I interviewed management and staff of the two main YO! Baltimore centers—HEBCAC and Westside, and two of the three satellites—the McKim Center and Studio 760 (time constraints did not permit me to interview staff at The Chance, the third satellite center). In addition, I interviewed the YO! Baltimore Director, Ernest Dorsey, and several of his staff at the Mayor’s Office of Employment Development, and attended two system-wide management meetings. I also remained in close contact with staff through phone calls and emails. To best capture the youth perspective, but to prevent disruption of their on-going work in their classes, trainings, internships and employment, I scheduled interviews with three youth—Olivia White, Donell Rogers, and Kiera Brown—prior to their classes, asking them questions about what it is like to live in and grow up in their neighborhoods, how they became connected to the centers and how their participation in the YO! System has impacted their lives. I am grateful to the availability, interest and willingness of the staff and youth for sharing their perspectives on the Youth Opportunity System, and for Karen Sitnick, the Director of the

Mayor's Office of Employment Development for permitting me access to YO! Baltimore files, documents and other pertinent information. In addition, I sought advice and guidance from KidsCount Research Associate, Laura Beavers, at the Annie E Casey Foundation, who assisted me in accessing data on the well-being of children and families in Maryland, Baltimore City and the Empowerment Zone, and consulted with Marion Pines, at the Sar Levitan Center of the Johns Hopkins University. Without the strong support from everyone mentioned, I would not have been able to document this important system and tell the stories of the people it impacted the most—over 4,000 youth in Baltimore city whose lives were positively and permanently affected.

The Need for Youth Services in Baltimore

It is often difficult for adults to relate to the teenage years and to understand the pressures that youth face as they are physically, mentally and emotionally developing. Youth are heavily influenced by their exposure to and involvement in various social settings, such as family, school, church and community. As they mature and learn new things, youth struggle with the discovery of their interests, beliefs and values—their identity. For youth who live in the Empowerment Zone, however, there are added pressures such as poverty, drugs, crime and family dysfunction. These factors can cause them to become distracted and possibly disconnected from positive social networks that would otherwise have helped them to become successful in transforming their educational and career goals into reality. Without consistently stable and positive social influences, teens can become at risk of failure and hardship.

In both the state of Maryland and Baltimore city, there is a strong need to intervene with policies, programs and services that target improved outcomes for children, youth and families, especially for people of color who are disproportionately affected by poverty and fragile family structures. In Maryland, US Census data reveal that 19.8% of African American children live in poverty as compared to 5.4% of whites, 10.2% of African Americans between the ages of 16-19 have dropped out of high school as compared to 6.6% of whites and 13.2% of African Americans, ages 16-19, are idle (neither working nor in school) as compared to 5.9% of whites. Equally disturbing is the data that show that 15.4% of African American children have no parent in the labor force as compared to 4.2% of whites, 56.5% of African American children live in neighborhoods where more than 35.2% of families are female-headed (no spouse present) as compared to 7.7% of whites, and 22.3% of African American children live in neighborhoods

where more than 38.1% of working-age men are unemployed or not in the labor force as compared to 2.2% of whites.¹

Outcomes for Baltimore children and families are no better, and in some cases when compared to state data, are alarmingly worse. According to the 2003 Kids Count Data Book for Baltimore, the city's infant mortality, child death and low birth-weight rates are more than one and one half those for the state. Baltimore's rate of babies born with low birth-weight is 75% higher than the national average, its dropout rate is three times that for Maryland and more than 70% of babies born in the city are to single moms. In addition, since 1993, the rates of out-of-home placements and child violent death increased by 47% and 5% respectively.² Statistics on child well-being indicate children are living in very difficult conditions, placing them at high risk of becoming disconnected early in their young life. Specifically, 31% of Baltimore's children live in poverty, 59% live in single parent families, 53% live in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment, 30% live with a household head who is a high school dropout, 38% live without a vehicle at home, 15% of Baltimore teens are high school dropouts (ages 16-19) and 18% of Baltimore teens are not attending school and not working (ages 16-19).³ Now, more than ever, these compelling data must be used by policymakers and community activists to develop effective policies and programs for youth.

The Baltimore Safe and Sound Campaign, a grantee of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Urban Health Initiative, recently produced a memo on effective funding and investments for Baltimore children, youth and families in order to inform and influence

¹ Kids Count Pocket Guide on African American Children, *State-Level Measures of Child Well-Being From the 2000 Census*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003

² Kids Count Fact Book for Baltimore City, Joint Publication of the Maryland Kids Count Partnership: The Baltimore City Data Collaborative, The Safe and Sound Campaign and the Family League of Baltimore City, 2003

³ City Kids Count Pocket Guide, *Measures of Child Well-Being in the Nation's Largest Cities*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004

Maryland Senator Barbara Mikulski in her support for programming. The memo states, “72% of Baltimore City voters agreed that programs like after-school programs, education, job training, service-learning, recreation, arts and health care programs...should be a very high priority, and we should find the money to fund them—ahead of concerns like tax breaks,” and “in a December 2003 poll conducted for the Safe and Sound Campaign, 96% of likely Baltimore City voters supported more funding for youth development programs.”⁴ The statistics on the well-being of children and their fragile family structures as well as the public opinion polls of Baltimore citizens indicate that youth development services and supports should not only be an area of strong interest for the city, but also a necessity in order to ensure the prevention of youth disconnection (from school, from employment, from positive social networks) later in life.

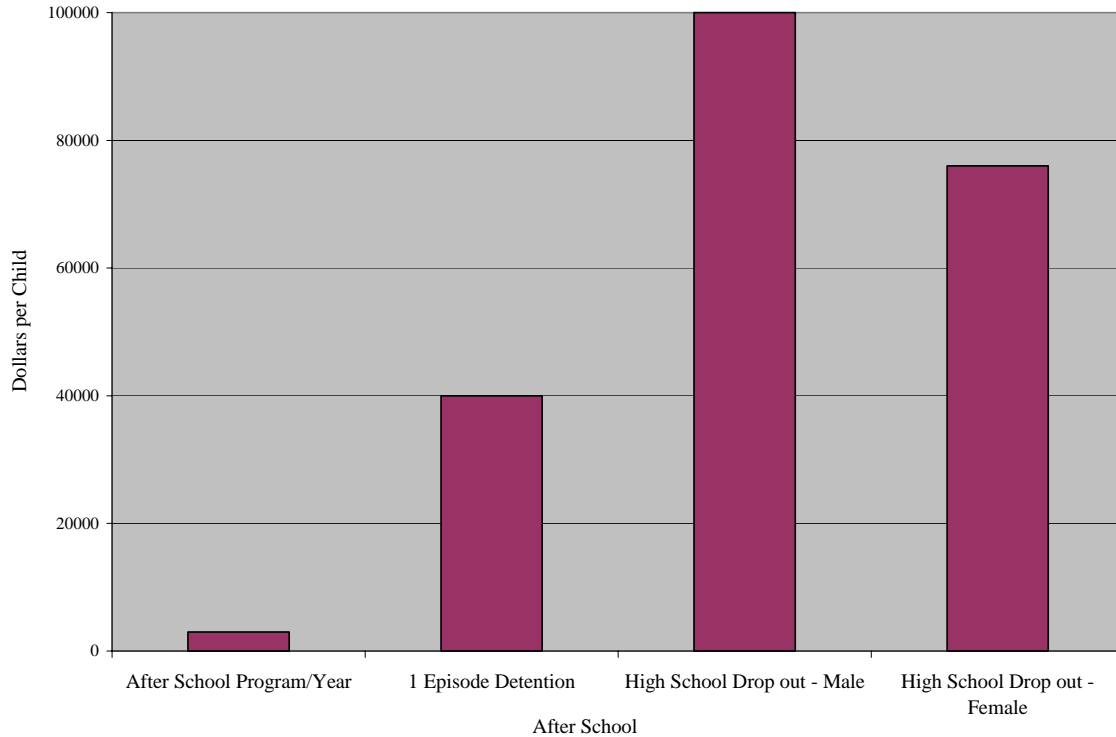
Sometimes the human service data are not enough to convince policymakers, and the economic impact must be shown as well to tell a compelling story about the high costs of neglecting this young population. Research published by the Family League of Baltimore City indicated that public spending for youth in Baltimore focused more on maintenance services (services that help kids and families exist at a basic standard of living, examples include education and income support) at 48% and remediation services (services that remedy current problems) at 47%, rather than preventive services (services that are proactive and forward looking, helping kids develop in healthy ways that prevent future problems) at 5%. Despite this, it is more cost beneficial for the city when policymakers shift funding to preventive services such as after-school programs rather than remediation (as seen in the chart below).⁵ In many cases, despite living in poverty, youth are responsible and resilient. They are making tough decisions to dropout of ineffectual schools, enrolling in alterative education or GED classes, financially

⁴ Baltimore’s Safe and Sound Campaign, April 5, 2005 Memorandum to the State Programs Director in Senator Barbara Mikulski’s office, Funding for Effective Investments in Baltimore’s Children, Youth and Families

⁵ Ibid

contributing to their family’s household income, gaining occupational trades and training, serving in the parental role for their siblings or with their own children as teen parents and trying to remain motivated and focused on their own success. Youth are trying to not just survive, but also succeed. In the meantime, these stress factors can be removed from their lives if institutions such as government, education, communities and families concentrate on preventive measures and assumed public responsibility by engaging and motivating youth, helping to change negative misperceptions of youth and providing them with the support they need as they strive for success. This is partially what Youth Opportunities Baltimore has attempted to accomplish as a mix of all these institutional components into one comprehensive set of programs, services and supports for in-school and out-of-school youth who live in the Empowerment Zone.

**Public Expenditures on Children and Youth
Comparing Costs – Preventive vs Remediation/Bad Outcomes**



Source: Comparative Costs and Benefits of Programs to Reduce Crime – Washington State Institute for Public Policy, May 1999; Dropping Out: Public and Private Costs – Urban Institute, 4/97

Baltimore's Empowerment Zone

In 1994, President William Clinton designated Baltimore a 'federal empowerment zone' and established an initiative that would entice businesses to invest in redeveloping under resourced communities. As a result of the designation, Baltimore received a \$100 million federal grant and \$250 in federal tax incentives for local public and private investments. The grant target area extended over 6.8 square miles and covers three separate areas of the east, west, and south. It covered 25 census tracts in 33 residential neighborhoods and a new nonprofit, Empower Baltimore Management Corporation (EBMC), was formed to develop and manage the revitalization strategy. To decentralize and legitimate management and operations, EBMC established six new community-based organizations called Village Centers: East Harbor, Harlem Park, HEBCAC, Poppleton, Sandtown, and Washington Village. Their purpose was to provide oversight and implement selected strategies within its geographic area and develop the larger vision for their neighborhoods.⁶

The Baltimore Empowerment Zone (EZ), a place of extreme poverty lacks adequate services and supports for children, youth and families. In 1999, during the writing of the Baltimore YOG, 1990 Census Data indicated that youth comprised 15% of the total EZ population (72,362), with an estimated 76% between the ages of 14-21 years old. Predominantly African American (78% as compared to 20% whites) residents were living with a median household income of \$14,516 and an unemployment rate of 15%. Youth statistics were worse. The youth unemployment rate was between 35-40%, the dropout rate was 40%, juvenile arrests were at 247%, the teen birth rate was at 44% and 88% of mothers were unmarried at the birth of a child with 53% having less than a high school education at the time of their child's birth. The

⁶ www.baltimorecity.gov/business/empower/index.html

1999 federal Youth Opportunities Grant was strictly targeted at improving outcomes for youth who live in Empowerment Zones like this across the country.

The US Department of Labor’s Youth Opportunity Grant

In late May 1999, the Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative was published in the Federal Register announcing the availability of funds for Local Workforce Investment Boards and the communities that they serve that meet certain criteria. The Youth Opportunity Grants (YOG) were first authorized in the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and the statement of purpose is as follows: “to make a significant attack on concentrated poverty and unemployment in this country.”⁷ It continues to state that these grants are as “a complement to the Job Corps, School-to-Work, and formula-funded youth programs to provide the Department of Labor with a means to saturate targeted high-poverty urban and rural communities with sufficient resources to cause a significant drop in youth unemployment and idleness in these communities. In turn, decreasing joblessness and idleness in high-poverty neighborhoods has the potential to help communities and taxpayers in several other ways by reducing crime, youth gangs, illegal drug use, and welfare dependency.”

The DOL grant had specific goals, objectives and core principles, and it outlined the target community and eligible participants. The goals of the grant were focused on increasing the long-term employment of youth in the empowerment zone and on concentrating resources to bring about community wide impacts on employment rates, high school completion rates and college enrollment rates. In addition, the DOL required grantees to abide by core principles in developing their youth strategies. These included: providing comprehensive services, ensuring participation of caring adults, a commitment to excellence, guaranteeing long term follow-up to

⁷ Guide for Preparing a Quality Youth Opportunity Grant Application

all youth participants and instilling in youth a sense of personal responsibility and accountability for their actions. The target community was designated as youth, ages 14-21 who reside in Baltimore's Empowerment Zone. In addition, the grant required collaboration from diverse community partners such as agencies, the public school system and the private sector in an innovative way in order to provide comprehensive services and supports for youth.

The YOGs had six criteria: 1) need in the target area, 2) project design and service strategy, 3) management and accountability, 4) public sector and community resources and sustainability, 5) private sector resources, and 6) dropout prevention plans. The grantees were required to demonstrate the concentration of poverty, school dropout and the lack of employment opportunities in the area, as well as the extent of the gaps in the capacity of the local infrastructure to address these barriers. The project design and service strategy criteria required grantees to develop new and better strategies for increasing the long-term employment of all youth and show the extent to which the project assists them in acquiring the necessary academic, technical, workplace skills and work experience. The management component required quality services and positive outcomes for youth, as well as accountability of the project to the community through advisory boards and youth councils. The sustainability component required that the project committed necessary resources to keep it going during declines in federal funding and leveraged resources from the community to sustain it beyond the life of federal funding. The private sector resources criteria required effective strategies for involving the private sector in providing jobs and work-based learning slots and other necessary project resources, and the dropout prevention criteria required the development of effective strategies for reducing the school dropout rate and increasing college enrollment.⁸ Through an intensive series of planning with community partners, the Mayor's Office of Employment Development applied for and was

⁸ Guide for Preparing a Quality Youth Opportunity Grant Application

successfully awarded the Youth Opportunities Grant in March 2000 and by contract requirements, had the first youth center, the Westside Center, operating in September of the same year.

The Baltimore Youth Opportunity System

In 2000, the Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED) submitted a winning application, resulting in the receipt of a multi-million dollar grant. A well-written proposal was developed, including data and description of the EZ and subsequent need for services, a well-structured project design and service strategy outlining the development of community youth centers along with academic and career partnerships with both public and private institutions, strategies for identifying and maintaining quality staff, connection to human service providers and responsible management to ensure a quality, effective and efficient system for youth. In addition, as part of the grant preparation process, an assessment of EZ youth services was conducted. Information was collected regarding the scope and scale of youth services available to City teens, these included: career training and preparation services, community service jobs such as YouthBuild and Civic Works, Police Athletic League after-school programs, entrepreneurial activities, cultural enrichment programs, mentoring, College Bound Foundation support, peer mediation services and alternative education and GED options. Although the mapping exercise discovered that youth services were diverse, they also realized they were fragmented and insufficient to meet the needs of all youth. Based on this extensive assessment and the proposed new comprehensive system of supports and services for youth, Baltimore's Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED) along with the vast community stakeholders made the case that this ambitious plan could be successfully implemented. In March 2000, \$44 million was officially awarded to the MOED to be allocated over a five-year

period. This was budgeted at \$11 million per year in the first two years and reduced to 75% of that amount or \$8.25 million in the third and fourth years and \$5.5 million in the current year (year five).

Designing a youth-accessible system and forming effective community partnerships were two essential elements in ensuring the successful delivery of services and opportunities. Taking advantage of the existing structure of the Baltimore EZ Village Centers, two main YO Community Centers were established—one on the east, managed by the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition (HEBCAC), and one on the west side in the Lafayette Square Community Center in the Harlem Park/Lafayette EZ community. Three smaller Satellite ports were developed—one located on the lower westside and referred to as Studio 760, and two on the lower eastside, located at the McKim Community Center and The Chance Community Center. These centers were already well established and recognized within the community. This made them obvious choices for the center and satellite locations.

The YO! Baltimore Partners are vast and represent both the public and private sectors including city government, community based organizations, nonprofits, and corporations as well higher institutions and hospitals. The following is a list of the partners: Baltimore City Community College Skills Training, Baltimore City Community College/Upward Bound, Baltimore City Department of Social Services, Baltimore City Public School System, Baltimore Mental Health System, Catapult Learning (Sylvan), Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development/STRIVE, Civic Works, Community Law-In Action, East Baltimore Community Corporation, Funds Following Students (The Door), Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition, Inc. (HEBCAC), Living Classroom Foundation, Baltimore City Department of Juvenile Services, Sar Levitan Center/Johns Hopkins University, The Chesapeake Center for

Youth Development, Inc., Vocational Service Program of Sinai Hospital, Washington Village/Pigtown Neighborhood Planning Council, Inc., Community Building in Partnerships/Youth Build, McKim Center, Baltimore City Health Department, Department of Recreation, and The National Urban Technology Center, Inc. This represents an extensive partnership with organizations, agencies and companies that provide services and opportunities for youth in the system. They offer occupational and other trainings, GED classes, alternative education, literacy instruction, access to fitness, sports and recreation, employment, internships, mental health and substance abuse treatment, college and computer classes. Each contracted partner is required to meet monthly with program staff at the Mayor's Office of Employment Development in order to discuss the progress toward their contracted work, youth cases and any issues, concerns or problems that arise. This meeting structure ensures accountability by the partners to the system's management and also ultimately to the youth who participate in the opportunities that are provided. Partner feedback also helped to strengthen existing programs, develop new programs or change or remove those that were less effective. The partners have also assisted YO! Baltimore management in developing a sustainability plan to manage after the cessation of federal funding in July 2005.

*"We have never lost a youth to the street, because we operate on the notion that we must give them what they need as much as humanly possible."
--Kerry Owings (Westside Manager)*

YO! Baltimore Staff and the Youth Development Process

In order to understand the process by which the services are provided and accessed by the youth, I interviewed four staff members who work closely with the members—two Employment Advocates, a Job Coach and a Job Developer. These youth development practitioners form a

complete process by which youth are enrolled, assessed and placed in employment and educational opportunities. They are integral to the system, and although the responsibilities differ among these staff, they all have the same thing in common: their authentic and enduring dedication to the success of the youth members. Below are the general position definitions, responsibilities, processes, and staff perspectives on their experience working within YO! Baltimore.

Employment Advocate General Definition:

This is a youth development position, which is an approach to working with young people that defines goals (outcomes) based on capacities, strengths and development needs of youth. This is service delivery work at the full performance level. Work involves providing direct advocacy, case management and employability, and support services for out-of-school.⁹

Employment Advocate Responsibilities:

Employment Advocates provide comprehensive career and employment training services to all Youth Opportunity Area participants that will result in positive transition outcomes including: managing a caseload of at least eighty (80) youth; developing individualized educational and career plans that successfully transition youth into the work world and/or educational program; promote positive results in areas such as: goal setting, enrollment in education programs, employment and training activities, which leads to full-time placements, adjustment to community environment, improvement in job/academic performance and attendance, and interpersonal relationships with peers and authority figures; and, responsible for

⁹ Baltimore Youth Opportunity System, Employment Advocate Position Description

connecting out-of-school youth to services on and off site services toward academic completion and full-time employment.¹⁰

Employment Advocate Process:

The Employment Advocate enrolls youth in the system, administers assessment tests, and assists them in setting personal and professional goals. The process is lengthy and time intensive, sometimes taking three hours to complete, but it is necessary in order to determine a youth's eligibility for services, develop a proper diagnosis of the youth's capabilities, strengths and weaknesses including both personal and professional, determine their overall well-being, skills, interests and talents, design a set of short and long-term goals and prescribe activities such as trainings and education to meet these goals. Lakeia Funderburk, Westside Center Employment Advocate, described the process in detail. Each day two employment advocates are assigned to enroll new caseloads, but if an advocate is busy, a youth is never told that they have to wait. Lakeia said that youth are instantly referred to an advocate because, "we don't want them to leave or run the risk of getting an impression that they are not able to be assisted...we want them to know that they are important." To begin the enrollment process, first, Employment Advocates must verify youth eligibility.

Eligibility is based on certain criteria such as proof of identity, age and residence. Youth need to provide a series of documents that indicate they are U.S. citizens, between the ages of 14-21 and reside in the Empowerment Zone. A Maryland identification card, driver's license, birth certificate or social security card is acceptable. In addition, documents must be provided showing proof of address such as school transcripts, court letters, or bills postmarked by at least six months. The address is then verified by using a census tract book.

¹⁰ Ibid

After identification and residence has been proven, the Employment Advocate starts the enrollment process. The youth must read and sign a *Customer Agreement of Participation* form that states the mutual responsibilities of the system staff as well as the youth. Youth responsibilities include: working hard when placed in a job or skills training program; representing YO! Baltimore in a professional manner; regularly attending all work, academic placement, or skills training; remaining drug-free from possession and use of illegal drugs and staying clear of involvement in criminal activity. The *Customer Request* form allows youth to indicate specific areas in which they are requesting assistance, such as: finding shelter, attaining the GED, obtaining tutoring for school, college information and preparation, mental health and substance abuse counseling, counseling for finances and family issues, conflict resolution, job training or job placement, food stamps, child care assistance, transportation or other services. This form, while identifying the needs of the youth also provides an opportunity to cite interests and hobbies. Another essential form is the *Customer Profile* which captures a core set of personal information on the youth including social and family information, employment history and physical health. Finally, the YO! Baltimore enrollees must sign a sexual harassment statement, read and understand the drug policy and obtain their Personalized Membership Card—these must be worn at all times while in the centers and satellites. After the eligibility and enrollment process, the youth must complete numerous assessments and set their personal and professional goals.

Youth must complete various assessments in order for the Employment Advocate (EA) to help them set goals and prescribe activities. Among these are: the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, the Career Key, the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) is an evaluation of youth independent living skills such as: housing

& community resources, money management, self-care, social development (communication, relationships, community values) and work & study habits (career planning, decision-making, study skills). The Career Key determines the professional career interests and the TABE, assesses the youth's reading and math scores. In addition, the EA will screen the youth to determine whether there is a need for mental health or substance abuse counseling and will also test the youth's computer literacy skills. Completing these assessments is the only way staff can get a clear picture of the youth's skills and limitations to enable them to assist them in setting goals.

Although most youth who enter as new members urgently request assistance in obtaining employment, the EA strongly encourages the youth to continue their education while they are working. Gaining practical job skills like customer service, management, and teamwork is important but youth are informed that by gaining proper credentialing and education, and earning a college degree, they will increase their long-term earnings potential. Unfortunately for most youth in the EZ, this can be a difficult task due to the lack of challenging, engaging learning opportunities in their neighborhood public schools. In fact, most public schools in these areas are extremely under resourced and in disrepair—lacking qualified teachers, manageable teacher/student ratios, and adequate supplies and equipment. Some youth feel that by dropping out of school, they will have a better experience getting their GED, but later realize that preparation for this is much more difficult than attending school. Although some youth I interviewed had failed the test several times, they kept retaking it until they passed. Still others, start work and have difficulty finding the time, focus and motivation to prepare simultaneously for the GED. Although fewer youth attend schools that offer alternative education classes leading to their high school diploma, most employers say they prefer this over the GED.

After enrollment and assessments, the EA works with the youth to develop the Individual Opportunities Plan (IOP) by setting short and long-term goals and these will vary according to the youth's skills and limitations. For example, a young person may need to increase reading and math levels before taking the GED or finishing their high school diploma, or may want to participate in job readiness training, pre-GED or GED training, while other youth prefer to head straight for employment opportunities obtaining short or long-term employment or prepare for entrance to two or four year colleges. Other goals may be personal such as obtaining a drivers license, participating in parenting classes, participating in substance abuse rehabilitation or mental health counseling. Lakeia said that the center may get an estimated five to ten new enrollees each week.

Despite the lengthy enrollment process, there is an incentive to having youth fully prepared to go through from start to finish. Youth need to be informed of the time intensity in advance so that they will really consider whether they have the time to go through the process. If they get half way through and have to leave, this makes the enrollment numbers decrease in the performance-based database, called KidSmart, and then the Employment Advocate has to locate them to complete the paperwork so they can be actively involved. Explaining the process further, Lakeia said that “unless the young people are involved by being in a placement like GED classes, alternative education, job readiness training, in an internship or employment, you can't inactivate their file until after twelve months.” Once the youth are actively involved in a long-term placement, however, the Youth Opportunities system values consistent youth follow-up and coaching. It requires staff to remain in contact with them for two years after they are actively involved in long-term unsubsidized employment, long-term education, or long-term occupational skills training—defined as retention goals. This can be difficult to do, however, as youth can be

very transient, either moving out of the Empowerment Zones, not providing updates on their contact information or are unwilling to provide information on their status to staff. YO! Baltimore invested in the right staff to ensure that youth are properly enrolled, assessed and directed on the right path toward achieving their goals.

During an interview with Lakeia, it is easy to see why she is so successful in her job—she can relate to the youth and their experiences growing up in a tough neighborhood. Lakeia grew up in and lives near the Westside Center. She was raised by her grandparents because during her youth, her parents were in jail on drug charges. Although this was a difficult situation for Lakeia, it never stopped her from succeeding. She recalls, “My grandparents were very strong people and they were always stressing that I stay in school.” Lakeia, like many of the youth she helps, had children at a very young age. “I had my son when I was 16 years old, but I looked at my family’s life situation, at what tore them apart, and I didn’t want that for myself.” She touts school as her savior as well as her own commitment to improving her opportunities.

When reflecting on the types of youth cases that she manages, Lakeia says they are about “half and half.” She shared, “I have good ones and we help them set goals and figure out how to accomplish them. The other half, however, refuse any help. Some are here because their probation officer sent them and you can see that these youth are disappointed in themselves and will interfere with the success of others, but we can’t give up on them. We have to move them also toward success.” Lakeia has been an Employment Advocate for two years now, and in June 2004, she earned the additional title of Activities Coordinator. Lakeia is now constantly on the look out for something new to offer the youth to keep them involved in the center. She sets up functions, events and trips, and although she still has a caseload, it has been reduced so that she can also take on these added responsibilities. As well, Lakeia’s strong leadership landed her yet

another title as Team Leader, in which she motivates, supervises and problem-solves with five other staff members to help them reach their team and individual goals of enrolling youth and moving them along their paths to success.

Lakeia knows that youth often think that they have to *settle* in life and as a result set their expectations low. Since many of the youth don't have their GED or high school diploma, they may feel like they are destined to work in unskilled jobs like their peers, i.e. fast-food, warehouse/factory work, construction and nursing. Lakeia says, however, that despite this perception among the youth, the Employment Advocates help the youth to imagine a different future with different possibilities such as attending college. This can be difficult though for them to see, so Lakeia also provides them with the reality of building job experience. She explains, "Some youth have it set in their minds that they want to be a nurse, since peers who have done this seem to be making good money." Lakeia said that she tries to support what the youth think they may want to pursue career-wise, but she also points out the reality that it takes a process of skills building and professional experience to get to a point where they are actually increasing their income. She said the tough part is that since the youth do not understand the process, they sometimes lack the determination that it takes to remain committed. For example, a career in nursing may begin with a series of entry level jobs with low pay to start and requires building up their experience and credentials in the field.

Lakeia said that although job readiness training does not ensure that youth will obtain and maintain a job, she said they need to experience the work environment, be coached through difficult situations and stay encouraged to remain focused on their long-term success. Despite the work of the Job Coaches, however, in serving as an intermediary between the youth and employers, Lakeia said that in some cases, young women and men aren't being patient enough.

She said that some just see the dollar signs and forget to ask about the benefits, the hours, the policies and responsibilities related to a particular job, and then they can become frustrated, discouraged and ultimately quit. “For these youth,” Lakeia said, “it may take a while to figure out that they need patience and determination to build job experience, but the Youth Opportunities staff is always ready to help them at whatever place they are in this realization—encouraging them to challenge themselves.”

In addition to her EA responsibilities, Lakeia is also the Activities Coordinator. In this position, she polls the youth to see what they are interested in doing and then plans and implements activities to keep them engaged. On Monday nights, for instance, she leads a female support group for fifteen young women. The group is called the Sister’s Circle and they talk about issues that affect their lives such as poverty, relationships with men, budgeting and parenting. Lakeia said that most times, she brings food that she cooked from home using her own resources to cover the costs or she brings in snacks. Lakeia is particularly proud of the group of women as they not only share experiences and stories with each other but also volunteer in their community to support others. She said that they may feed the homeless through a Goodwill program or prepare packaged meals for Moveable Feast, a local Baltimore-based nonprofit that delivers these to families and individuals with HIV/AIDS. Between January and June of each year, the women prepare 700 meals two times a month and deliver them to homes. In addition, Lakeia also heads up other activities for the women such as Belly Dancing and Cardio Bootcamp that usually occur right before Sister’s Circle.

Lakeia shared her perspective on managing the youth caseloads as an Employment Advocate. In describing an EA’s responsibilities, she said that a normal caseload is between 65-70 (although hers have been currently cut in half due to the added responsibilities as Activities

Coordinator) and calls this manageable but difficult to keep up with at times. She tries to assist the other EAs in developing a process to deal with the caseload, by encouraging them to enter new data every month in the KidSmart database. Any changes in the files must be entered within thirty days to ensure that goals are being met and is reflected in the performance reports that managers regularly run.

When asked about the challenges and inspiration in her position as an EA, Lakeia's responses showed how deeply she cares for the youth members and their success. Although she feels she is good at what she does, there are some youth who still may fall through the cracks and this worries her, "I believe I can reach anyone, and I am very competitive in doing this, but there is always someone you are not going to reach, for instance a lot of young males are good in math but they won't try to improve themselves to excel in this. I look at their TABE scores and they are excellent, but then you don't see them for like six months or more and you start to think the worse about them like they are either dead or in jail." Despite the challenges, Lakeia still remains hopeful, "I look at members who were 'off the hook' (crazy, wild) and other advocates who would have given up on them, but they developed a closeness to me. I would eventually see a change in their development. They can support themselves now, they have cars, their own places, they're married and now their trying to speak in their community to younger kids about what they went through to reach this level of success—how they went from 'zero to hero.' I like to see them taking responsibility for themselves and others in the community." Lakeia is deeply invested in her work, the lives of the young people and their movement toward prosperous futures.

Another Employment Advocate at the Westside Center, Bryant Payne shared his perspective on the position, and like Lakeia, he can relate closely to the youth. Before becoming

a Baltimore YO member in June 2001, Bryant Payne was unemployed. He tried taking a few classes at Coppin State College with the support of his family, but he was still living dangerously on the streets. After reading an article in the newspaper about YO! Baltimore, he decided to find out what it was all about. Bryant immediately enrolled in YO but found that he couldn't get a job due to his criminal record. He recalls, "I was denied for several jobs. I felt that I interviewed well, and I had taken the job readiness training, but I was still denied for jobs. I was very distraught, but the Westside Center staff—Employment Advocate, Robert Henderson and Job Developer, Anthony Green, continued to encourage and embrace me." A turning point came for Bryant, though, when he became aware of the Youth Practitioner's Institute (YPI). He realized that he wanted to train to be a youth practitioner. He wanted to help other youth like himself succeed, and he recognized that the staff "took a keen interest" in him. He recalls, "they let me know that I had good potential, helped me update my resume, and I went to the orientation."

Bryant knows that everything good comes through hard work and reflection. He reflected on the difficult process of applying to the YPI, "I hate to say this, but I was improperly dressed for the orientation. I was eager; I took good notes, but I was pulled up on the way I was dressed. But because people saw my potential, I saw the positive in it. I felt like if people expected more from me, then I should also. The selection process for participation in the YPI training was very competitive, and I really wanted the opportunity, so the staff wrote letters of recommendation for me, and I wrote an essay for the application. My essay was entitled, '*The Dream Begins With Me,*' and it was about the fact that I made changes in my life that could help others make change a possibility as well. This essay was all real, all from the heart and out of fifty to sixty applicants, they were only going to choose 8 and they chose me. I was pretty proud of myself." In October 2002, Bryant began his training as an EA, consisting of case

management, communication and becoming familiar with the KidSmart database.” Bryant became an Employment Advocate in May 2003, and upon looking back on the entire experience, he realized just how far he has come, “plenty of times I just wanted to give up and they (YO! Baltimore staff) embraced me. They saw in me things that I didn’t see in me.”

When asked about his challenges and inspiration as an EA, Bryant discussed the difficulty in getting the youth to believe in themselves—“to get members to understand that the choices they make have an impact on them, to get them to learn to value who they are and understand their power as a human being. I want them to know that someone cares, so they can open up. The main focus is to get them educated, and then they will succeed. If you can know your power, then you will understand that the only person that can stop you is you. They must realize that they can take charge.” In 2003, Bryant was recognized for his achievements in Washington, DC with an Exemplary Youth Award for his outstanding services as a YO! Baltimore member. He received this award just as he was becoming an Employment Advocate. He recalls, “this was one of the proudest moment of my life.”

Job Coach Definition:

The work of the Job Coach involves assisting youth with job readiness and retention skills; placement coordination and follow-up with youth and employers after placement; serving as intermediaries with employers; and, intervening if problems occur and informing clients of their progress.¹¹

Job Coach Responsibilities:

The Job Coach works with both the youth and employers to ensure successful job placement, and retention. Specifically, the Job Coach provides group and individual sessions to

¹¹ Baltimore Youth Opportunity System, Job Coach Position Description

support youth career assessment, job readiness training, counseling and case management, i.e. awareness of work ethics; addressing family dynamics that create barriers to successful employment; developing a professional resume and practice interviewing; developing strong work habits; and, assertiveness training. The Job Coach also meets with employers and human resource directors in order to discuss their needs and maintain satisfaction with the youth employee. The Job Coach also offers support services so that youth are adequately trained, coordinates visits with youth clients on-the-job to observe work habits and relationships, meets with supervisors to address any barriers to success, and encourages youth productivity and upward mobility.¹²

Job Coach Process:

After the assessments in the enrollment process, the Job Coach, reviews the youth's skills, career interests and past employment experience to determine whether training or coaching is needed before job placement. Sometimes youth face barriers to employment such as having a criminal record, lack of workplace skills or previous job experience, personal behavior or substance abuse issues. Job Coaches are trained to be aware of these barriers and to work with the youth to overcome them through job readiness training, improvement of life skills, job shadowing and internships, and mental health and substance abuse counseling. They also inform them that these barriers may affect the time that it takes to be ready for and placed in long-term employment, but that persistence and belief will ensure they overcome these obstacles.

Once the youth are placed in positions, Job Coaches help them retain that opportunity by serving as an intermediary between them and the employer. By examining the personal assessments and barriers that they face, Job Coaches assign risk levels to each youth—high,

¹² Baltimore Youth Opportunity System, Job Coach Position Description

medium and low. Based on the level, Job Coaches conduct on-the-job visits to ensure that youth are encouraged to succeed. They also maintain a relationship with the employer to ensure that they understand the benefit of this intermediary action. For instance, for a high-risk-level person, the coach may meet with the youth and employer every other day, for a youth at mid-level risk, they may visit once or twice per month and for a low risk person, coaches may perform site visits every thirty to sixty days.

Reginald McTeer, HEBCAC Job Coach, understands the complexities of youth development in the Empowerment Zone. He grew up in the neighborhood, and his mother and father both fostered a strong belief in the importance of education and involvement in creative activities. His mother was a school teacher and his father worked in the post office. Reggie said that although he lived in a working class family, both of his parents had cars and drove him to after-school activities including baseball, basketball camp, summer school and karate. He never had idle time, and his parents were always getting him interested in other things beyond toys, clothes and the streets. Although he never had the things that a lot of kids his age had growing up like video games and fancy clothes, his family didn't feel obligated to buy him these things either. Reggie observes the youth today and thinks their admiration for expensive clothing makes them feel rich and raises their self esteem, "most of the kids in this neighborhood don't come from families like his, with both parents working and able to support their child's interests. My family life was fulfilling, but I wonder about youth who don't have this support. Some of these kids may be interested in dance, but who is going to pay for ballet? I got to see other things outside of this neighborhood. I wasn't trapped in this place. My father was interested in jazz, and we went to the Hampton Jazz Festival. My mother and father had all these interesting books in our library, so I had a sense of history. I could learn about culture or they could show

me.” He said that after a certain age, he felt he had to leave the neighborhood, that he couldn’t take seeing his friends getting in trouble, so he went away for college. Reggie earned his undergraduate degree in Sociology from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore and is currently working on his Masters degree at Johns Hopkins University.

Pondering his experience in YO! Baltimore, Reggie feels he has matured immensely. Reggie accepted the position of Job Coach in 2001, and through his experiences, he feels he has developed patience for youth with different learning needs. He uses interactive exercises in teaching the job readiness training so that everyone will be successful in the class, “these are humans, and although they may not see immediate results, they will occur over a lifetime. Youth have to come to their own self awareness; they can put goals out there, and we can help them to reach them, but it doesn’t happen over night.” After the youth work with the Job Coach to become “job ready” they are next referred to a Job Developer whose responsibility is to identify potential employment opportunities.

Job Developer General Definition:

The work of the Job Developer involves providing full marketing service to employers and employability services to youth.¹³

Job Developer Responsibilities:

The Job Developer works with both youth and employers to ensure that there is a successful match. Specifically, the Job Developer markets services to employers to develop jobs for out-of-school youth, markets and develops customized training opportunities for participants and negotiates subsequent contracts and agreements with employers and training vendors, identifies employment and training needs required with changing labor market trends, develops

¹³ Baltimore Youth Opportunity System, Job Developer Position Description

and maintains information of an inventory of eligible and qualified youth for referral to jobs, works with youth to help assess their employment goals and assists in enhancing their employability by conducting workshops, job clubs and job search seminars. Job Developers arrange for job interviews for qualified youth, as well as referrals to customized training or other employment activities. They also coordinate and conduct employer activities on a regular basis on site at the Centers (i.e. job fairs, mass recruitment process, job specific pre-screening workshops), maintain a posting of current job openings and make recommendations to management concerning ways to facilitate transition of youth from programs to unsubsidized private sector jobs.¹⁴

Job Developer Process:

The Job Developer arranges many opportunities, in which youth can participate, such as job fairs, internships, job shadowing and unsubsidized employment. These are set up with various employers ranging from low-skilled jobs to those requiring specialized certification and training. Once the Job Coach refers a ‘job ready’ young person, the Job Developer places them in one of these opportunities depending on their prior work history. For instance, for youth with very little experience, internships and job shadowing (subsidized by YO! Baltimore) is a good first step for youth to earn money and workplace skills prior to full-time placement. Although some youth express their disinterest in working in low-skilled jobs such as fast food or warehouses, the Job Developer has these opportunities on hand as well so that youth can build up their work experiences and exposure to customer service. The Job Developer informs youth of the lengthy process involved in building experience but advises them that it is the only way to build trustful relationships with employers who could later recommend them for higher pay,

¹⁴ Baltimore Youth Opportunity System, Job Developer Position Description

greater responsibilities and future employment. If youth already have a job history, the Job Developer will place the youth in unsubsidized employment according to their interests.

In addition to job placement, the Job Developer also designs customized training for employers who are looking for employees. Dionne Pratt, HEBCAC Job Developer, recently developed training for CVS, a national pharmacy chain with stores located in Baltimore city. By working with the Maryland Center for Arts and Technology, a model store was accessed to provide training for youth. Youth practice on cash registers and role play customer service scenarios before they apply for CVS jobs. CVS, like some of the other employers that work with YO! Baltimore, offer jobs with living wages (currently \$8.70 for a family of four)¹⁵. The company currently has three positions paying \$8.50/hour for pharmacy associates and photo lab techs and \$9.50/hour for shift supervisors. Dionne recruited youth from all the centers, held an orientation, and taught the youth how to fill out on-line applications. She feels this is a great opportunity for the youth because the training prepares them to be successful, the pay is much higher than the minimum wage and the company offers a great benefits package with full benefits, including tuition remission, vacation and a 401K retirement plan. This is one of many opportunities that Job Developers coordinate for youth members. They also arrange for job fairs and other ways for youth to find employment.

Dionne agreed that center goals are important to meet, but quality is more important than quantity. She said that she doesn't just place youth because they say they want a job, she has to be sure that they are ready to work, "it is difficult to tell youth when they are not ready for certain jobs, but I have to make them understand the importance of training and preparation for their future." For short-term needs, though, she does have a whole range of employers like Popeyes and Burger King, or if the youth needs to prove they have a job for juvenile court, she

¹⁵ Baltimore City Job Opportunities Task Force

has also written a letter on their behalf to explain the job development process and that youth are moving toward accomplishing a set of career goals for themselves. Out of about a hundred kids that she works with, Dionne estimates that at least sixty percent of them have a criminal background, therefore, she tries to target employers who will hire youth with prior convictions. She tells the youth that they may be limited by their record and that they may have to accept jobs that they may not like, such as working in a warehouse. She is honest with them and tells them that although times may be difficult, if they stick with the job and develop a strong work record, they will develop a trustful relationship with employers who will recommend them for future jobs. She also reminds them to make good decisions because they may never know how this will impact them down the road.

Beyond her business savvy, Dionne, like other YO! Baltimore staff, relate to the youth and their struggle to succeed. The work that she does is a way of giving back to her community, “I was a product also of the inner city and the public schools. I was really involved in the community, and I started working at the age of 14 at a youth development center planning activities. In the 11th grade, I won first runner up in the Miss Inner City Teen Pageant and received a \$2500 scholarship to help pay for college. I went to Villa Julie and earned a Communication Arts Degree.” Dionne has held many management positions in her professional career and would like to open her own business someday. She said that she “sees young people taking baby steps in getting to where they need to be and they feel good about it, maybe it’s getting their driver’s license, staying in school, purchasing a car.” She expressed her commitment to the youth, “I’m going to stay on top of them the best that I can. I use the numbers and the goals as a gauge, but have to focus on quality—getting the young people to change their environment, their lifestyles, and their total being to become successful.”

YO! Baltimore Members: Who are they?

YO! Baltimore provides services and opportunities to both in-school and out-of-school youth that live in the Empowerment Zone. The profile of an average YO! member is African American (97% black versus 2.5% white), 55% female, 45% male, a high school drop out (84%), and between the ages of 14-21.¹⁶ Youth development researchers describe these youth as disconnected from the broader society, lacking the skills and education to transition successfully into adulthood.

It is not unique to hear about the lack of funding and resources for public school systems, and Baltimore is no exception—leaving youth to suffer the costs. In my interviews with YO! Baltimore youth members, most who have dropped out of school have reported that it was a difficult decision to make, but one of necessity since they were not learning anything valuable. They complained of teachers losing interest in the students and not showing up for class. Many reported that they were ‘teaching themselves’ because they had substitutes who babysat them. Youth said they were having fun, but it wasn’t good for them, so they went against the peer pressure and left the school to get their GED or high school diploma.

I interviewed three youth members who were trying to take control of their lives and each agreed that they were happy to be involved with YO! Baltimore. Olivia White is 16 years old and completed the 11th grade at Frederick Douglas High School. She said that she decided to leave school, because she did not feel that she was learning anything. She said that her classroom was crowded with up to 80 students and there were no teachers, only substitutes who didn’t care about teaching. Olivia’s favorite subject is English, she keeps a daily journal and she is an avid writer. She is currently taking alternative education classes at the Westside Center and expects to graduate this September. Only having been a member for a couple of months, she has

¹⁶ Youth Opportunity Monthly Program Progress Report, March 05 Final

already done a lot, “YO will help me get my high school diploma and help me pay for college. I have a resume and job history already, having worked at the Southwest Career Center as a secretary. I learned how to properly answer the telephone, learned about writing a good resume, interviewing skills and career training. I learned to work the fax and copy machines and customer service. It was a great opportunity. It wasn’t about the money but about learning new skills. I am going to do something with myself if it kills me. I have brothers and sisters, and I want to be a role model to them.” Olivia wants to go to Bowie State College to major in criminal justice and psychology and become an FBI agent.

Donell Rogers,17, is also happy that he is involved in YO! Baltimore. He says staff are always keeping him engaged in positive things, “they keep you busy, you can’t get into trouble. I’ve been a member for a year, and I am taking classes. I am involved in projects like community service—we went across to the old folks home and we talked with the people there.” Joe Smith, Westside Center Assistant Manager, is like a mentor to Donell, “he looks out for me. He got a cousin in a job first and he talks with us about the risks of unprotected sex and HIV/AIDS. I am working on my GED, and he is also trying to hook me up with a job. I come in here every single day. Keeping me busy, always working you, checkin’ up on you to make sure you’re not doing the wrong thing. They (YO! staff) support all their kids and have good relationships.” Donell likes reading plays and recommended the *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, he likes going to see symphonies and says that classical music allows him to sit and think and clear his mind. He also likes basketball and other sports, and his favorite music is Rap. Donell said that, at first, when he started coming to the Westside Center he was hustling (selling drugs) and some of his family members were locked up. He said that he chose not to go this route, “you can’t make a career out of this.” He dropped out of Northern High School in the 9th grade, but he

says he wants people to tell him they are proud of him. He said that he set goals for himself and that YO! staff members “make sure you succeed.” Donell took the pre-GED three times until he finally passed. Donell is motivated and will move on to take the GED test next.

Kiera Brown, a quiet, shy, 16 year old has been a YO! member for a couple of months. She said that she didn’t enjoy public schools either and left Harbor City. She is now trying to get her GED, and although she did not pass the pre-GED the first time, she is determined to take it over until she passes. She said that her brother used to come to the center, “it kept him out of trouble.” Kiera wants to be an elementary or high school teacher, and her favorite subjects are Social Studies and English. She said she likes that she can walk to the Westside Center from her house. When asked whether she will go to college, Kiera said she is going to try. Kiera has four brothers and one younger sister—she is the second oldest and they look up to her and think she is doing something positive. She said her biggest challenge is to push herself to stay involved in the center. She wants to buy a big house and live somewhere quiet with her family. These are not the only youth that YO! Baltimore has affected. Employment Advocates, Job Coaches and Job Developers regularly input information on youth members into the KidSmart database to be able to quantify their impacts and areas that need improvement.

Data Collection

The timely and accurate collection and input of data into the KidSmart Case Manager database is crucial to monitoring the Baltimore YO System’s weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual performance which ensures that the maximum number of youth in the empowerment zones are being contacted, enrolled in the system and reaching their personal goals of educational and career attainment. In order to track youth progress, center staff must input information on youth and their involvement in eight measures defined by the DOL for the Youth

Opportunity Program. They are: 1) recruitment rate, 2) penetration rate, 3) enrollment rate, 4) completion rate, 5) total completion rate, 6) participation rate, 7) placement rate, and 8) retention rates. A description of these measures and the current rates for YO! Baltimore are listed below indicating their progress, achievement and accountability to both the US DOL and to the youth who are involved in the system.

Recruitment Rate

The Recruitment Rate is the percentage of contacted eligible youth of all the youth in the target area of the grant.

Since the project's inception, 5,066 youth have been recruited out of a targeted amount of 8,482, for an overall recruitment rate of 59.73%.¹⁷ Youth can be referred to the system through both direct and indirect ways, such as by using paid staff recruiters who perform outreach by visiting youth door-to-door or 'hanging out' at popular youth places in the neighborhoods, through teachers and counselors at area high schools, from other centers or satellites in the Baltimore YO System, through the Department of Social Services, Department of Juvenile Justice, etc. Managers and researchers on the YO system speculate that the difference in actual versus projected numbers is a result of the reduction in the youth population in the EZ over the life of the grant. For instance, the census data on the empowerment zone used for the development of the grant proposal was based off of 1999 figures. Since this time, there has been a tremendous loss of youth population (11% or 18,943) in these areas from 1990-2000 due to the demolition of several public high-rise housing developments, i.e. Murphy Homes, Flagship, etc. and the resulting disbursement of youth outside the zone to other areas in the city.¹⁸ In addition,

¹⁷ YO Monthly Program Progress Report, 03/31/2005

¹⁸ Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies, Occasional Paper No. 28: Neighborhood Effects of Hope VI: Evidence From Baltimore

youth are very transient and may have; either moved out of the Empowerment Zone or may be temporarily homeless, making recruitment difficult.

Penetration Rate

The Penetration Rate is the percentage of youth enrolled in the program of all youth in the target area.

Of the 8,482 youth in the target area, 4,291 were enrolled—meaning that youth completed the registration process with an employment advocate, including being interviewed, signing a customer agreement and completed skills assessment tests—for an overall penetration rate of 50.59%.¹⁹ Again, this rate may seem low, but in reality, the youth population shift that occurred over the years (see explanation above), the transient nature of youth in this age group, the youth's fragile family structures and their responsibility to support lagging household incomes may contribute to the difficulty in engaging youth.

Enrollment Rate

The Enrollment Rate is the percentage of the target enrollment goal achieved.

From the first year of the grant, the total numbers of youth enrolled is 4,291, which exceeds the enrollment goal of 2,870. This is an overall enrollment rate of 149%.²⁰ Each large center and the three satellites have annual enrollment goals. For example, in the program year of July 1, 2004 through June 30, 2005, HEBCAC's enrollment goal is 50, Westside's 75, McKim's 25, The Chance's 25, Studio 760's 10 and Future Plus' is 75.²¹ This may seem low for an annual goal, but managers know that the engagement and enrollment process involves a high degree of focused center resources. Despite this, the centers and satellites consistently exceed goal expectations by doing effective outreach to the neighborhoods, and by effectively informing

¹⁹ YO Monthly Program Progress Report, 03/31/2005

²⁰ YO Monthly Program Progress Report, 03/31/2005

²¹ YO Baltimore Performance Goals 7/1/04 – 6/30/05

youth in advance of the expectations on them as well as the range of services and opportunities that are available to them if they apply themselves and stay focused toward achieving their goals. As well, staff keeps the youth interested, engaged and motivated to complete the entire enrollment process and this has made all the difference. According to Lakeia Funderburk, Employment Advocate at the Westside Center, the enrollment process can be lengthy and time consuming, involving multiple assessments of the youth's personal and professional skills, as well as their educational and career interests and goals. After this, the youth still have to develop their Individual Opportunities Plans (IOPs) with their advocate, which guides their next steps toward signing up for activities within a given timeframe plotted out in three, six and twelve month blocks. She said it can take up to three hours to complete all of the required paperwork, but youth who are completely informed up front of both the costs and benefits of this process are more likely to stay in for the long haul. This ensures that the youth have the necessary information to succeed, with goals to strive for and the focused attention of youth practitioners.

Completion Rate

The Completion Rate is the number of enrollees who complete one or more pre-placement activities per the number of youth enrolled (pre-placement activities are: college/SAT prep, GED prep, internship/subsidized employment, job readiness training, reading/math remediation, short term occupational skills training, short term unsubsidized employment).

The completion rate is most impressive at 86% because the enrollment process alone can be a challenge, but the bigger challenge is often keeping youth focused, motivated and committed through the process of meeting their individual goals. Staff members report that they consistently encourage youth to work toward attaining their goals, which are different for each youth according to their interests and their plan for the future. For instance, they may advise youth to improve their basic reading and math scores, strengthen their life skills, attend their GED classes, stay focused on their on-line alternative education courses, prepare for college, job

shadow and intern, train for careers, and apply for and maintain employment. With the combination of high expectations that the adults place on them as well as the goals that the youth set for themselves, they are succeeding in greater numbers and 3,688 youth out of the 4,291²² completed at least one of their pre-placement activities.

Total Completion Rate

The Total Completion Rate is the number of enrollees who complete all prescribed pre-placement activities

A third of the enrollees or 34% complete all the prescribed pre-placement activities, and although this shows progress, it also leads one to ponder why the rate is so low.²³ Discussion with staff indicates that there may be several contributing internal and external factors such as the availability of activities, the staff to youth ratio and the lack of mentors and positive adult role models, the high quantity of prescribed activities and the lengthy process of completing them, familial responsibilities, barriers to success such as having a criminal record, dropping out of high school, or substance abuse, the lack of education, training and life skills, the internal motivation of the youth, peer pressures, and the mental and physical well-being of the youth. Staff encourages youth to reach their goals, but they are limited in their ability to ensure youth complete all prescribed activities. These factors shed light on the difficult nature of youth development work in the Empowerment Zones.

²² YO Monthly Program Progress Report, 03/31/2005

²³ Ibid

Participation Rate

The Participation Rate is the percentage of active enrollees participating on one or more youth development program activities in a given month (there are 15 DOL designated categories of which there are many different types of services. The 15 categories are: alumni groups, college/SAT prep, community service, GED prep, individual tutoring, internship/subsidized employment, job readiness training, life skills training, peer-to-peer mentoring, reading/math remediation, secondary school extra curricular activities, short-term occupational skills training, short-term unsubsidized employment, sports/recreation, support groups).

A measure that is easier to track is the youth involvement in activities offered at the centers and satellites. The year to date participation rate is at 94%.²⁴ There are many different opportunities to take advantage of at the centers and satellites, including both academic and career-oriented activities as well as fun, team oriented sports, arts and peer support groups. Joe Smith, Assistant Manager at the Westside Center, named at least twenty different activities besides the educational and employment trainings that his center provides that keep youth engaged, sharing with each other and learning new things. A few of these are: Sisters Circle (female support group), Brother-to-Brother (male support group), health fairs, sports and fitness (state-of-the-art exercise equipment on site), softball, basketball, holiday parties, STD/AIDS awareness and prevention, home buying seminars, financial literacy classes, teen parenting classes, and a recording studio.

Placement Rate

The Placement Rate is the percentage of enrollees placed in long-term unsubsidized employment, long-term education, or long-term occupational skills training (Placed Youth), or those who completed all prescribed pre-placement activities (Total Completers) or have been placed even if they have not yet completed all prescribed pre-placement activities.

Knowing the difficulties in having youth complete all prescribed pre-placement activities, the placement rate simply measures the percentage of enrollees in long-term employment, education or training. This is currently at 68%.²⁵ Higher than average, it shows that the youth

²⁴ YO Monthly Program Progress Report, 03/31/2005

²⁵ Ibid

have benefited immensely from their involvement in YO! Baltimore by achieving long-term goals, therefore, ensuring they will have a higher possibility of successfully transitioning into adulthood where they will remain constant contributors to the economy, to the viability of their families and communities.

Retention Rate

The Retention Rate is the number of placed youth who remain placed in long term unsubsidized employment, long term education, or long term occupational skills training at follow-up.

The YOG requires that the staff follow-up at least quarterly with youth for a minimum of two years after they secure long-term placements, in order to ensure that they are continuing to do well, and most are. The retention rate is 76%.²⁶ Follow-up and coaching is an important program element that the DOL grant designers require of their grantees, ensuring that youth are continuing to be encouraged while in their jobs and educational endeavors. This component is often overlooked or not able to be budgeted in for most youth development programming, so this is unique and forward thinking in structure. For grantees; however, follow-up with youth in the EZ can be tricky. Staff face various challenges in maintaining contact with the youth: they may not want to be contacted regularly and will assert their independence from the system once they feel they are doing well in their new position; youth can be very transient and may be traveling extensively to and from their school or job and may be difficult to reach; they may not have home phones or may not want to offer information on themselves to staff during home visits, or they might be homeless or living with relatives. Whatever the reason, it is good to see that the rate is high, but these factors persist and make it difficult to remain in contact with the youth.

²⁶ YO Monthly Program Progress Report, 03/31/2005

Impact on Employment, Education and Career Training

In terms of performance, the Baltimore Youth Opportunity System has been successful in assisting youth with employment, education and career training. The impact in these areas is significant. According to the most recent performance report at the writing of this paper, 1,865 youth were successfully placed in full-time employment, educational programs or skills training, 286 were enrolled in or graduated from a two or four year college, 187 earned their GEDs, 464 earned their high-school diplomas and 617 earned career training credentials. The average hourly wage that youth receive at the time of placement in employment is \$8.11/hour which is on par if not better than the current living wage in Baltimore City at \$8.70/hour for a family of four. Considering the short duration of the grant, the numbers of youth that are being served and the multiple barriers that the youth face in working toward their educational and career goals, YO! Baltimore has achieved in assisting youth to excel.

Management

The management and accountability structure of the Baltimore Youth Opportunities System contributed to its successful program implementation and improved youth outcomes. Management and staff at the Mayor's Office of Employment Development, as well as management and staff at the centers and satellites, regularly hold weekly, monthly, team and individual meetings to discuss goals and performance. Ernest Dorsey, Director of YO! Baltimore, holds weekly Port Operators meetings with the management of the centers and satellites. These meetings usually last for two hours and are packed with agenda items and updates. At the end of the meeting, staff such as Employment Advocates, Job Coaches and Job Developers from the each of the centers and satellites, report out on three youth cases that they have randomly selected from the KidSmart database. Youth cases are discussed at great length

while Mr. Dorsey asks tough questions about the status of the youth. The questions finally end when he is assured that staff have done all they can to engage, involve, encourage and move youth toward success. The random selection of cases ensures that staff provides quality and timely updates to the database as well as remain accountable to the youth members. Another accountability measure is the incorporation of youth input and ideas on everything from new activities to staff performance. A suggestion box is located in the lobby of every center and satellite and youth management teams hold regular meetings at each of the centers and satellites.

Sustainability

The DOL required grantees to design a sustainability plan as one of the six criteria to receiving federal funding and Baltimore formed a partnership in order to develop this. In 2004, a workgroup was organized comprising YO! Baltimore management, partners and other community stakeholders and a plan was outlined with three parts: determining the impact, visioning the future of YO! and designing a development plan. The first part of this plan is in the final stages, and an impact statement is due to be released this month. It focuses on collecting state and city-wide youth data and then cross walking it with performance data from YO! Baltimore. Specifically, it shows the impact on educational credentialing of out-of-school youth and the impact on school dropout, attendance and graduation rates for in-school youth; impact on participant employment and earnings; impact on teen birth rates; impact on crime rates and involvement with the criminal justice system; program performance in terms of the DOL established standards; the system development impact in terms of community collaboration and new partnerships; business and other community impact, and impact on specific youth. Also, the impact plan compares outcomes for youth who participated in the program to youth who did not take advantage of the opportunities.

The second and third parts of the sustainability plan focus on creating a vision for the structure and operations of a future Baltimore Youth Opportunities System, while also identifying necessary funding and resources. The workgroup incorporated input and expertise from a wide range of sources such as practitioners, partners, business and youth in order to design its future structure and programs. Based on this plan, attention will shift to leveraging resources. A development plan will be outlined based on the costs associated with the future design of YO! Baltimore and an inventory of existing funding will be drafted, as well as a strategy to influence additional financial support. I believe that an expansive partnership is necessary to broaden the public awareness of the impact the system has made on youth and the community. This should include foundations, businesses, community and faith-based organizations, and government representatives from offices such as the Office of Juvenile Services, Department of Social Services, Baltimore City State's Attorney's Office, Office of Neighborhoods, Department of Housing and Community Development, the Workforce Investment Board, Office of Employment Development, and the Office of Children, Youth and Families.

Conclusion

The Baltimore Youth Opportunity System is the first attempt in Baltimore City to provide extensive and comprehensive services and supports for youth who live in the Empowerment Zone. Although I attempted to research and analyze this system, inevitably there are unanswered questions and areas that require more thought. In one of the first meetings I had with Ernest Dorsey, Director of YO! Baltimore, we discussed several questions that still need attention. We pondered the alternatives for youth dropping out of school and what the plan was for our City to address the great numbers of youth who choose this option. We discussed the barriers youth face

to their success such as family dysfunction, substance abuse, homelessness, the high rates of juvenile arrests, teen pregnancy, low literacy and math levels, mental health and life skills issues and whether the school system could develop a plan to properly screen for these and provide crisis intervention upon their entrance to school, rather than youth feeling isolated and frustrated. We also discussed these barriers as reasons some youth make it in the YO! Baltimore system while others do not. The multiple barriers that some youth experience must be unraveled, like the peeling back of an onion—layer by layer—to encourage youth to believe in themselves, to trust in a better reality through perseverance and hard work and to affect positive change in their lives and in their communities. It takes years of focused attention on every young person in the EZ to address these barriers and help them succeed, as we know they all want to do. The Baltimore Youth Opportunities System has served as the place youth can find this focused attention. I hope systems like these continue to be developed and maintained. The future of our City's bright, talented, young people, especially those in the most underserved areas such as the Empowerment Zone, deserve to be noticed, appreciated, engaged and challenged. The government and educational administrations, businesses, community and faith-based organizations, and families should provide what youth need to succeed, because they deserve to have opportunities to become leaders. They will make Baltimore a better place—we must believe.

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Employment and Training Administration

Office of Job Training Programs

Workforce Investment Act

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Baltimore YO! Employment Advocate, Job Coach and Job Developer Position Descriptions

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