

Needham Youth Commission

Annual Town Report - Fiscal Year 2005

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Purpose

The mission of the Needham Youth Commission is to provide leadership and a community focus on youth and family issues and to promote community wellness by: Identifying and addressing youth and family needs; Advocating for youth and family interests; Partnering with other youth and family serving agencies; Developing and implementing quality programs and services; and Educating and communicating with the public regarding youth and family issues.

The Needham Youth Commission operates as a mental health resource offering a wide array of confidential clinical and programmatic services to children, adolescents, and families. While the Youth Commission's services are reaching more people and having a greater impact, it is clear that the need for such services far outweighs the department's resources; thus, many in Needham are not receiving support. The Youth Commission has worked diligently to construct meaningful services designed to meet the increasing and ever-changing needs of the Needham community.

FISCAL YEAR 2005 ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

Safe Surf: Internet Safety for Middle School Youth and their Parents: Funded by the Needham Education Foundation, this program provided students and parents with the knowledge to navigate the Internet with confidence. Through workshops and written materials, students and parents learned about appropriate ways to use the Internet. In FY 2005, 999 youth and parents participated in this program.

A Conversation...For Parents of a Teens: Sponsored by the Needham Women's Club, this new program allowed a maximum of eight parents per session to focus on a specific youth-related topic such as alcohol/drugs, suicide/loss, stress, and depression. Over 30 parents participated in this pilot program, and the program is slated to expand to seven sessions in the coming year.

Website: Over the past year more than 50,000 "hits" were registered on the Youth Commission website. Residents learned about our services, registered for programs, read the Youth Commission's Annual Report, viewed pictures of the staff, and much more. Special thanks to the Information Technology Department for their support in establishing this vibrant website. Please visit the Youth Commission online at www.town.needham.ma.us/youth.

Individual/Family Counseling: The Masters level clinicians on staff are skilled at working with youth and families who are experiencing difficulties with issues such as family discord, loss, drugs, alcohol, stress, and other mental health concerns. Who used these counseling services? They were neighbors, cousins, children, and friends; they were people with no health insurance or expired health insurance; they were people grappling with either a short or long-term problem; and mostly, they were people who had the hope and determination that life can bring greater satisfaction and reward. Perhaps the most frightening area of concern is that young people were encountering more complex issues at a younger age. It was not unusual to work with an elementary age youth coping with a significant loss, a middle school student coping with parental alcohol use, or a high school student with a serious drug problem. In the past year 609 hours of counseling were provided to Needham youth and their families.

Community Crisis: In November the Needham community grappled with the sudden loss of two young people, and the Youth Commission responded by outreaching to youth, parents, and families in a variety of ways --- from individual meetings, to group sessions, to the distribution of materials. Many staff hours were devoted to creating materials, staffing emergency drop-in centers, and meeting with local officials.

Counseling/Psycho-Education Groups: Group counseling/psycho-education was a practical and effective mode of treatment and allowed the staff the opportunity to interact with greater numbers of people over the past year. Group intervention offered a unique opportunity for young people to learn about issues which effect their peers and to receive feedback from their peers regarding issues such as: divorce, stress, self-esteem, abuse, depression, social skills, loss, drugs/alcohol, and violence/anger. Of special note in FY 2005 was the “Extreme Looks” program, a four-day mind/body/spirit group for girls. In FY 2005, 279 hours of group counseling/psycho-education services were provided.

Parents Please Talk With Your Mouth Full: “Parents” was a unique collaboration between the Youth Commission and Sweet Basil restaurant. During these one evening workshops parents enjoyed a terrific meal and had the opportunity to share, learn, laugh, and talk about the joys and challenges of parenting (prior to the workshop parents are assigned a book about parenting). The workshops were offered to parents of middle and high school age youth. In FY 2005, 38 parents participated in this program.

Active Parenting of Teens: This program was created to encourage parents to continue to develop their parenting skills. This 12-hour workshop has “graduated” over 450 parents since its inception in 1998. In addition to this workshop, follow-up Parent Dialogue Groups continued to meet to discuss issues related to raising healthy children and promoting wellness.

Substance Abuse Awareness Program: The Youth Commission continued to offer a structured 15-hour Substance Abuse Awareness Program (SAAP) for drug/alcohol-involved youth. This service provided an assessment of current substance use, intervention, education for youth and their families, and counseling services to support healthy lifestyles. All participants and their parents attended an Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting to assist in transmitting the message that drugs and alcohol can impact any person without regard to age, gender, or status.

PEEPS (Positive Education for Experiencing Peer Stress): PEEPS was an interactive workshop for 6th grade students that explored the issues of friendship and bullying. The goals of the workshop were to identify qualities students would like in a friend, understand that friends and friendships change, and to share experiences and hear feedback regarding how students would like to treat others and be treated in their peer relationships. Over the past year 285 youth participated in this program.

Picture Perfect: Picture Perfect was a workshop for 8th graders that investigated the issue of how the media portrays gender roles and appearance, and explored how this can negatively impact how youth can feel about themselves. The goals of the workshop were to help students learn to identify gender role stereotypes, to understand how stereotypes are portrayed in the media, and to investigate how media messages impact them on a daily basis. In FY 2005, 285 youth participated in this program.

LINCS Program: The LINCS Program (Loss Information and Community Support) was designed in collaboration with the Needham Public Schools. LINCS' mission was to assist youth in addressing the frequently upsetting, overwhelming, and confusing issue of "loss." This included, for example, the death of a parent or grandparent, the separation/divorce of parents, the loss of a cherished pet or possession, or the break-up with a boyfriend/girlfriend. Loss is a topic youth will be dealing with more and more as they get older, and it is critical to understand the impact loss can have upon a young person's academic, physical, social, and emotional well-being. The LINCS program engaged 325 youth in FY 2005.

Teen Dating Violence Program: In conjunction with the Needham Domestic Violence Action Committee, the Youth Commission provided seminars on Teen Dating Violence for all 9th graders at Needham High School. The seminars were designed to teach the unique aspects of Teen Dating Violence, how to recognize the warning signs, and ways to access community supports. Over the past year, 325 youth were involved in this program.

RAY of Hope Program: RAY (Recognize A Youth) was established by the Needham Youth Commission in an effort to acknowledge the outstanding service and positive contributions that young people are making to the Needham community. Working in collaboration with the Needham Business Association, each month a young person was selected as the RAY of Hope recipient and was awarded a certificate from the Youth Commission and a check from a member of the Needham Business Association. The RAY of Hope program validated youth and recognized their role in making the Needham community a special place to live.

Employment and Volunteer Programs: The Employment Program consisted of two primary services: 1) Youth were linked with residents and provide around-the-home support in the form of babysitting, yard-work, and snow removal; and 2) Youth investigated employment opportunities in local businesses such as offices and restaurants. Additionally, the Volunteer Resource Directory was created to inform youth of area volunteer opportunities. In FY 2005 these programs fielded 360 inquiries.

Books and Bridges - The Parent/Child Book Club: Using literature as a bridge between generations, this program consisted of an interactive two-session program for mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and parent and sons, and parent and daughters to explore issues of mutual interest and concern. In FY 2005, 56 youth and their parents participated in this program.

FLIX: Using Films to Explore Important Youth Issues: FLIX was an exciting program offering teens, pre-teens and parents the opportunity to watch a "teen-related" movie, discuss the messages in the movie, talk about the challenges of being a teen today, share free food, laugh, learn, and be with friends. We offered several sections of FLIX throughout the year for high school students, middle school students, and parents.

Needham Unplugged: Electronics are a wonderful part of life --- people learn, communicate, and access information from electric powered devices and watch TV or surf the Internet as a way to relax and to relieve the stress of daily life. Unfortunately being so "plugged in" can isolate people. Instead of interacting with family and friends, people all too often become passive voyeurs. Needham Unplugged was an awareness campaign to remind families and residents to "unplug their electronics" and "plug into" each other. "Unplugged" was a reminder that there is more to life than what is on the other side of a plug. A calendar for the month of March outlined activities that did NOT require electricity and emphasized person-to-person interaction and health. The centerpiece of this years "unplugged" occurred on March 10th as it was a no homework, no sports, and no meeting night for the Needham Public Schools, and there were no town meetings and virtually no civic, religious, or community meetings took place in Needham. This night of "nothing" was a welcome relief to youth, parents, adults, and families. Many area communities such as Newton and Belmont were impressed enough to replicate this program in their communities. Special thanks to partners at the Park and Recreation Department and the Charles River YMCA, Needham Board of Selectmen, and to the Needham Public Schools for their support.

NOTE: In partnership with the Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering and the Needham Public Schools, NOTE (**Needham Olin Technology Exchange**) was a community collaboration that helped to close the "digital divide." This program encouraged Needham residents to donate old computers, Olin College students refurbished these, and the computers were then installed in Needham homes that previously had no computers.

Peer Tutor Program: The Youth Commission's Peer Tutor Program represented a progressive youth-to-youth collaboration. This program matched high school students with middle and elementary school students in need of academic or organizational/study skills assistance. The Youth Commission's role consisted of outreach to potential participants, training of high school volunteers, monitoring weekly tutoring sessions, providing support if problems occur, and facilitating communication between volunteers and participant families. Over the past year, Peer Tutor Program volunteers provided 1335 hours of support to younger students.

SADD (Students Against Destructive Decision): SADD's mission was to support students in providing the school and community with information, facts, and food for thought on topics of concern to young people. The new, expanded philosophy embraced the notion that each individual benefits from making informed choices about his or her behavior and beliefs. This past year, SADD provided a variety of awareness campaigns to the students at Needham High School on topics such as drinking and driving, teen dating violence, and stress.

Project VAN (Volunteers Around Needham): VAN offered youth ages 13 to 17 the opportunity to work as part of a team providing valuable community service to non-profit organizations in Needham. Sites included Charles River ARC, Needham Park and Recreation Department, Needham Community Council, Needham Public Library, Needham Council on Aging, and Wingate at Needham. Project VAN is generously supported by the Needham Community Council. VAN participants provided more than 400 person hours of free volunteers services over the past summer.

Diversion/Restitution Program: In conjunction with the Needham Police Department and the Dedham District Court, the Youth Commission continued to offer youth who have committed minor violations of the law the opportunity to participate in community service work in lieu of further court action and/or fines. The Youth Commission's role was to work with offenders and their families to identify the motivations for their behavior, to provide support as required, and to oversee the placement and completion of community service. In the past year, participating youth completed assignments at the following sites: Needham Public Library, Needham Police Department, Needham Fire Department, and Needham Council on Aging. In fiscal year 2005, the Youth Commission supervised over 100 hours of community service to the Town of Needham.

Graduate/Undergraduate Internship Program: In FY 2005, the Youth Commission welcomed a clinical intern from Boston University's Graduate School of Social Work to provide individual, family, and group counseling services as well as extensive work on the Peer Tutor Program. Over the course of the academic year, this intern provided over 600 hours of free service to the Needham community.

Seminars/Workshops/Presentations: The Youth Commission designed and facilitated numerous trainings in the past year including a training for new Needham Public School Staff, Babysitter Training Seminars, presentations at the schools and in the community and many others. In FY 2005 the Youth Commission worked with a total of 2633 youth, parents, and professionals in seminars and/or workshops.

E-Mail Sign Up: In an effort to inform youth and families of the services of the Needham Youth Commission, e-mail addresses from residents were accepted and information was sent regarding programs. By the end of FY 04 hundreds had registered for this free service. To register, residents may send an e-mail complete with their name and years of birth of their children to: Needhamyouthcommission@town.needham.ma.us.

Partnerships: The Youth Commission devoted considerable time working with the larger community and over the past year collaborated with groups such as:

- Needham Domestic Violence Action Committee (DVAC)
- YMCA --- Charles River Branch
- Needham Business Association
- Needham Community Wellness Collaborative
- Needham Clergy Association
- Needham Public Library

- Needham Council on Aging
- Needham Park and Recreation

- Riverside Community Care
- Regional Center for Healthy Communities
- Needham Community Council
- Needham Education Foundation
- Needham After Dark
- Needham Public Schools
- Community Health Network Area
- Olin College
- Avery Crossing

The Youth Commission received grants and/or donations from the following organizations: Needham Community Council, Tolman Trust Fund; Rotary Club of Needham, BankNorth, Needham Women's Club, local businesses, private citizens, and many others.

Publications: The Youth Commission created and/or distributed the following original publications in FY 2005 (many of the below are available online at <http://www.town.needham.ma.us/youth/YCpublications.htm>):

- Needham Youth Card
- KIDS Survival Guide
- Parent Guide to Teen Parties
- Ask the Youth Commission
- Youth Source
- Parenting Literature
- Making the Middle School Years Work
- Networks Book
- Safe Surf: Internet Safety for Middle School Youth and their Parents