

# Needham Youth Commission

Annual Town Report - Fiscal Year 2008

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Alexandra Hogan  
Kyle Megrath (Clinical Intern)

## **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.

In the past year the Needham Youth Commission celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. To commemorate this event, the staff engaged in many activities including the creation of a 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary DVD (which is available online). Learn more about this milestone [www.needhamma.gov/youthcommission/40th](http://www.needhamma.gov/youthcommission/40th).

## **Fiscal Year 2008 Highlights**

**Safe Surf: Internet Safety for Middle School Youth and their Parents:** Initially 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 2008, 275 youth participated in this program.

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

**Website:** It is estimated that over the past year more than 60,000 "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.needhamma.gov/youthcommission](http://www.needhamma.gov/youthcommission).

**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; but 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 647 hours of counseling were provided to Needham youth and their families.

**Community Crisis:** Over the past four years, the Needham community has grappled with the sudden loss of several 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 informational materials. In addition the department was actively involved in the Needham Coalition for Suicide Prevention. A significant number of staff hours were devoted to creating materials and meeting with community leaders.

**Counseling/Psycho-Education Groups:** Group counseling/psycho-education was a practical and effective mode of both prevention and 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 affect 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 was the "Extreme Looks" program, a four-day mind/body/spirit group for girls. In FY 2008, 292 hours of group counseling/psycho-education services were provided; this represents an increase of 25% as compared to five years ago.

**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.

**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, parent and sons, and parent and daughters to explore issues of mutual interest and concern. A special evening focusing on suicide and depression was held and participants read the book "Darkness Visible" by William Styron. In FY 2008, 51 youth and parents participated in this program.

**Loss Program:** The Loss Program 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, suicide, 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 Loss program engaged 386 youth in FY 2008.

**PEEPS** (Positive Education for Experiencing Peer Stress): PEEPS was an interactive workshop for 6<sup>th</sup> 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 300 youth participated in this program.

**Picture Perfect:** Picture Perfect was a workshop for 8<sup>th</sup> 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 2008, 320 youth participated in this program.

**Teen Dating Violence Program:** In partnership with the Needham Public School's Health and Physical Education Department, the Youth Commission provided seminars on Teen Dating Violence for all 9<sup>th</sup> 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, 353 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 provided 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 2008 these programs fielded 267 inquiries.

### **Patrick Forde Good Person Memorial Award**

In 2005, Needham resident and community activist Patrick Forde passed away unexpectedly at the age of 51. Patrick was a person who cared deeply about Needham and about youth and families, as well as being supportive of the work of the Needham Youth Commission. In an effort to honor Patrick, this award is given annually to a Needham resident who has helped make Needham a better place to live through his/her volunteer work and commitment. This award is recognition that through volunteerism and caring, each person in our community is able to enhance Needham. The first recipient was Richard Remnitz for his work with the Needham Youth Center; this year's recipient was Connie Barr for her work with dozens of community programs and groups.

**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 year's “unplugged” occurred on March 13th; it was the 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. 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 occurred, and facilitating communication between volunteers and participant families. Over the past year, Peer Tutor Program volunteers provided 1500 hours of support to younger students.

**Make A Statement Day:**

This program was implemented at Needham High School for students and staff. Aimed at promoting diversity, tolerance, and understanding by creating an opportunity for students and staff to communicate about issues of importance to them, students and staff created and wore t-shirts with quotes, statistics, and/or statements about meaningful issues in order to raise awareness and have a voice. In the third year of operation, 800 participated in this event this past year.

**Take Back the Night:**

Take Back the Night was a community-wide event organized and led by Needham High School students to promote awareness about domestic and dating abuse. The focus of the evening was prevention through education and it was sponsored in large part by the Needham Domestic Violence Action Committee (of which the Youth Commission is an active member). The event featured live music, a candle light vigil, guest speakers, and resources/information.

**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 2008, 40 parents participated in this program.

**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 volunteer services over the past summer.

**Graduate/Undergraduate Internship Program:** In FY 2008, the Youth Commission welcomed a clinical intern from Boston College's Graduate School of Education 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, interns provided over 650 hours of free service to the Needham community.

**QPR Suicide Prevention Trainings** (Question, Persuade, Refer): The QPR Suicide Prevention model is patterned after the success of the CPR (Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation) medical intervention and is based upon the several concepts including: Those who most need help in a suicidal crisis are the least likely to ask for it; and that the person most likely to prevent a person dying by suicide is someone they already know. Trainings are one-hour in length and are available to any community group in Needham. In the past year over 170 people were trained.

**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 Needham Public Library. In FY 2008 the Youth Commission supervised over 370 hours of community service to the Town of Needham.

**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 2008 the Youth Commission worked with a total of 4,052 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 (to date our list-serve is many hundred and growing daily). To register for this free service, residents may send an e-mail complete with their name and years of birth of their children to: [Needhamyouthcommission@town.needham.ma.us](mailto:Needhamyouthcommission@town.needham.ma.us) or simply complete this online at [www.needhamma.gov/youthcommission/email](http://www.needhamma.gov/youthcommission/email).

**Partnerships:** The Youth Commission received grants and/or donations from the following organizations: Needham Community Council, Tolman Trust Fund, Rotary Club of Needham, Needham Domestic Violence Committee, Needham Women's Club, Middlesex Savings Bank, and many more local businesses, and private citizens.

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 Coalition for Suicide Prevention
- Needham Public Schools
- School Health Advisory Council
- Olin College
- Avery Crossing
- Needham Metco

**Publications:** The Youth Commission created and/or distributed the following original publications in FY 2008 (all are available online at [www.needhamma.gov/youthcommission](http://www.needhamma.gov/youthcommission))

- Needham Youth Card
- KIDS Survival Guide
- Parent Guide to Teen Parties
- Ask the Youth Commission
- Youth Source
- Information on Suicide
- Parenting Literature
- Making the Middle School Years Work
- Networks Book
- Safe Surf: Internet Safety for Middle School Youth and their Parents
- 2007/2008 Calendar (including over 50 articles for parents)

## **FISCAL YEAR 2008 Statistics**

Youth Commission programs and services have grown in scope --- over a decade ago there was virtually no support for parents, and today there exists a range of parenting programs such as “Safe Surf: Internet Safety Parent Program” and “A Conversation...For Parents of Teens.” In addition, the Youth Commission is servicing more of the community with no increase in staff. Over the past ten years, program usage by the community has skyrocketed; as an illustration of the growth of the department, below is a brief statistical comparison of two Youth Commission programs over the past 3 years.

	Workshops/Training/Seminar Participants	Peer Tutor Program Hours
FY 2008	4052	1500
FY 2005	2633	1335
<b>Percent Increase 2005 - 2008</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>11%</b>

Statistics are kept for all programs as well as at the conclusion of all programs, participants complete evaluations in an effort to assist the staff in understanding the impact and value of each program/service. Comprehensive statistical summaries for the past five years are available online at: [www.needhamma.gov/youthcommission/reports](http://www.needhamma.gov/youthcommission/reports), and individual program evaluations may be obtained by contacting the Youth Commission office. Finally, in the past year the department implemented a common set of statistical performance measures to better compare programs to each other as well as programs over the course of years.