

**Prevention Strategy: Social Determinants of Health**

**1. Approach 6: Building Youth Social Cohesion**

**2. Associated year 5 PPOs:**

PPO 3.0 (Strategy Label: Social Determinants of Health) - Increase the percentage of youth reporting high levels of social cohesion to 50% in Eastern Cranston by March 2018.

AO 3.1 (Strategy Label: Coalition Building) - Increase the number of Youth Empowerment Zones in Cranston RI from one to two by March 2018.

AO 3.2 (Strategy Label: Social Determinants of Health) - Increase the percentage of staff involved in the YEZ who demonstrate basic mastery of the Positive Youth Development approach to 70% by March 2018

**3. Statement of progress made (in the last 6 months):**

The second Youth Empowerment Zone (YEZ) was launched at the Kidventure program at Gladstone Elementary School. The staff of the program had already participated in the Positive Youth Development training provided previously, so the implementation focus was on the other program elements of the YEZ. The Assistant Site Coordinator of the program identified 3-5<sup>th</sup> grade students who were interested in participating in the student leadership team, and the DELTA FOCUS Program Coordinator participated in designing an application and then interviewing each student with the Assistant Site Coordinator. The students chose a couple specific subcommittees to participate in, which include: Program Improvement; Newsletter; Mentorship (of K-2 students); and various short term subcommittees that plan specific events such as the Snowflake Ball, a Community Movie Night, and Community Yard Sale. The Assistant Site Coordinator has met with the entire student leadership team 3 times, in addition to meeting with various subcommittees weekly. The leadership team has helped plan the Spring session of the program, redesigned the method for student activity selection, prepared materials

and décor for fundraisers, as well as meeting with the General Manager of Aramark, the school district food service provider, to discuss changing the snacks available during the program.

Individual students from the team also have various responsibilities that include assisting staff during snack and recess.

The DELTA FOCUS Program Coordinator presented a poster about the YEZ project at the National Conference on Health and Domestic Violence in San Francisco in late September 2017, and was featured in social media coverage of the event by Prevent Connect.

Some elements of the YEZ implementation were made more difficult due to a change in leadership. The Program Director for Bain+2 and Kidventure left her position, which was then left vacant for two months by the school district, during the first half of the school year. The student leadership team at Bain had been working directly with her, and no other staff met with them in the absence of a Program Director. The DELTA FOCUS Program Coordinator was eventually hired to replace the Program Director, which will lead to greater sustainability in the long term, but requires some amount of rebuilding to take place in the short term. This leadership transition will enable the YEZ to continue independent of DELTA funding.

Near the end of the reporting period, the new Program Director (formerly DELTA FOCUS staff), implemented additional professional development for all program staff in Positive Youth Development concepts and Developing Quality Curriculum. This was a refresher for veteran staff who had been through the original 6 hour training, and ensured that new staff are oriented to the goals and methods used to cultivate youth social cohesion in the YEZ at both school sites.

#### **4. Overarching implementation/programmatic barriers:**

During the first staff training on Positive Youth Development Theory, there was some pushback from educators not comfortable with the approach, especially the idea of giving youth decision making power. Once students were added to the hiring panel for the summer camp, one teacher

filed a union grievance objecting to their involvement. There was also an existing school-day environment at the start of the project that was not conducive to youth empowerment or social cohesion, due to a Principal who was punitive and verbally aggressive with students. The situation building-wide improved somewhat with a change in leadership. However, after the new school administration was put into place in the middle school, there was conflict with the after-school program, and the Principal repeatedly attempted to undermine the Program Director by making complaints at the district level.

### **5. Overarching implementation/programmatic facilitators:**

There were many, very strong community relationships and partnerships developed during previous iterations of DELTA and during DELTA FOCUS. These partnerships allowed for mutual capacity building and support through various challenges. In addition, the support from RICADV and the RI DELTA Organizers group around transitioning the programming to the outer layers and evaluating a developmental project was crucial. Another key facilitating factor has been the staff of the school programs who embraced and enhanced the YEZ and its core concepts. Despite some resistance, the majority of the staff was energized and motivated by the approach and structure of the program.

### **6. Description of results considered significant:**

The YEZ Social Cohesion survey was developed after the implementation had begun, so the baseline results from spring 2017 were actually reflecting almost a full school year of implementation, which included staff training, selection and training of the youth leadership team, and the implementation of community focused project-based learning. As a result, the “baseline” was not measuring a true “before” picture, and the results were much higher than expected. The final survey was given almost a year later, which happened to coincide with program leadership changes and followed the two month absence of a Program Director. During

the few months leading up to the final survey, the youth leadership team at Bain+2 was not active, and students and staff were concerned about the future and stability of the program in the absence of leadership. Enrollment declined, and there was some inter-staff conflict. The environment within the program changed dramatically, some of the structure was neglected, and the data reflected that same change. Due to the DELTA Program Coordinator's transition into the Program Director role at the school, one of the priorities for the program moving forward is to revive not only the Youth Leadership Team, but the energy of the YEZ in general.

During the implementation of the YEZ, the local media coverage and attention from various elected officials was positive and substantial. The students were able to give a member of the RI Congressional Delegation a tour of the program and express to him how important they felt it was to support these types of projects nationwide. The Cranston Mayor visits the program a couple times a year and interacts with the students, as do a few of the School Committee members. Many of these youth would never have had occasion to interact with elected officials, but now are comfortable talking to them at length about their community projects. It is also helping to give another public perspective of youth in that area, which can help disrupt the stereotype that they are "up to no good" or "troublemakers" in a neighborhood with gang activity. Positive representation of youth in the community and the media was a strategic goal for the program.

As students aged out of the program by entering High School, many of them, especially members of the student leadership team, have come back to volunteer and eventually work. The program currently has 7 high school staff who co-teach and assist with the academic groups and clubs. These are students who enjoyed their time in the program so much, and built such wonderful relationships, that they didn't want to leave. It also helps current middle school students in the program to see high school mentors and have relationships with them.

**a. Associated evaluation questions:**

3.1 Is there an increase in social cohesion among youth at the two schools involved in the DELTA FOCUS project?

3.2 Are staff at the program sites demonstrating knowledge of positive youth development strategies when working with youth?

3.3 Has a second “Youth Empowerment Zone” been established in Eastern Cranston?

3.4 What were the significant milestones that happened along the way to creating this Zone?

**b. Evaluation design:**

Evaluation question 1 was measured via the YEZ Youth Social Cohesion Survey, which was adapted from the Merit Survey, created by Dr. Shepherd Zeldin. The survey was administered via SurveyMonkey to program participants at Bain+2 twice. The baseline was administered in April 2017, despite the fact that the implementation had begun in September 2016. This was due to difficulty locating and adapting an appropriate instrument. The final survey was administered to program participants at Bain+2 in February 2018, using the same collection method. The items on the survey all utilized a five point Likert scale, with 5 being the most positive answer. The data from SurveyMonkey was exported to Excel, and the DELTA FOCUS Program Coordinator averaged the item scores of each student survey, creating a “social cohesion score” for each respondent. A score of 4 or higher indicated that they consistently chose the two most positive response options, and was therefore used as the benchmark for “high social cohesion.”

Evaluation question 2 was intended to be measured using the APT tool from NIOST, which involves instructor self-report and program observation components. The staff evaluation was intended to take place in the middle of the 2017-2018 school year. However, the previous Program Director was the only staff member certified to implement the APT evaluation, which is proprietary. As a result, once she left the program, the tool was not legally allowed to be used.

The new Program Director is becoming certified so that it can be used in the future, but those results are not available in time for this report.

Evaluation question 3 was whether or not a second YEZ one was implemented within the Kidventure program at Gladstone Elementary School. As noted in the narrative above, that has absolutely taken place, and the student leadership team at that site is incredibly active.

Evaluation question 4 was intended as a way to collect significant program events in a more narrative format. As the project has progressed, these have been automatically included in the reporting for the project.

**c. Final outcomes that were achieved:**

Evaluation question 1 – The first YEZ Youth Social Cohesion Survey, in 2017 had 36 fully complete response sets. 42% of those respondents met the benchmark of 4 points or higher.

Although this initial survey was intended as the baseline, it was administered after 7 months of program implementation. The second survey, administered in February 2018, had 28 complete response sets, partially due to diminished enrollment after the departure of the Program Director and the subsequent lack of activity from the student leadership team. Of those 28 respondents, 25% met the benchmark of 4 points or higher. This drop in the percentage of students reporting high levels of social cohesion was clearly not what the DELTA FOCUS Staff had hoped for.

However, in the context of the school environment during the timing of each survey, it still seems to demonstrate that when fully implemented with active program leadership, the YEZ does have a positive impact on youth social cohesion.

Evaluation question 2 – The data was unable to be collected as intended in the evaluation plan due to unforeseen staff changes and the proprietary nature of the evaluation instrument.

Evaluation question 3 – Yes, a second YEZ was established.

Evaluation question 4 – Qualitative milestones achieved during this project include: Staff receiving 6 hours of Positive Youth Development Theory training; the recruitment and training of the student leadership team; the official public launch of the Youth Empowerment Zone and associated media coverage; the addition of 3 youth to the summer camp hiring panel; and the site visit from US Representative Langevin and associated media coverage; and the presentation of a poster on the YEZ project at a national conference.

**d. Which SMART objectives were met, and factors that contributed most to those outcomes:**

PPO 3.0 (Strategy Label: Social Determinants of Health) - Increase the percentage of youth reporting high levels of social cohesion to 50% in Eastern Cranston by March 2018.

This SMART objective was unmet, in large part due to unforeseen staffing change in the leadership of the program.

AO 3.1 (Strategy Label: Coalition Building) - Increase the number of YEZ in Cranston RI from one to two by March 2018.

This SMART objective was met, primarily due to the presence of the dedication of the Assistant Site Coordinator at the elementary school, who continued to work with the DELTA FOCUS Program Coordinator in the absence of a Program Director.

AO 3.2 (Strategy Label: Social Determinants of Health) - Increase the percentage of staff involved in the YEZ who demonstrate basic mastery of the Positive Youth Development approach to 70% by March 2018

This SMART objective was unable to be measured as intended, and therefore is unmet.

**7. Data-to-Action**

**a. Changes in the approach to implementation as a result of data-to-action process:**

Two areas of data collection during the implementation specifically impacted the development of the program. The first was a set of focus groups conducted with youth to discuss their thoughts on building community and the future of the program. Those focus groups were used to inform the priorities of the staff working to shape what eventually became the YEZ. The second piece of data collection involved questions for parents that were added to the program registration form. These questions assessed the level of parent support for youth being included in decision making and having a say in the program. The results gathered from those questions allowed the program to resist some pushback from school personnel who disagreed with the Positive Youth Development Theory underpinnings of the YEZ. This granted the project to grow authentically with less interference.

**b. Changes in the approach to evaluation as a result of data-to-action process:**

At the beginning of the DELTA FOCUS funding cycle, the YEZ had not even been conceived of, and the strategies being implemented and evaluated were at the individual and relationship level of the social ecology. The data collection occurring for the original strategy highlighted the very small impact that it was likely having, which drove the conversations around community level impacts that led to the creation of the YEZ. The evaluation plan had to completely change as the objective of the project changed.

**8. Lessons Learned**

**a. Most critical lessons learned/recommendations:**

Approaches like the YEZ require existing relationships and structures in the community that can support a high level of collaborative change. The relationships developed during previous iterations of DELTA were absolutely crucial to the existence of support for what became the YEZ. Those were developed through a conscious strategy on the part of the DELTA FOCUS Program Coordinator, which boiled down to “show up.” Over the years of implementing

prevention programs in Cranston, that strategy meant attending as many community partner events and meetings as possible, and becoming a fixture in the community who people recognized and felt connected to. By the time the YEZ became the focus of this project, the DELTA FOCUS Program Coordinator was well known and so commonly in the school that the district issued a staff badge despite the fact that they were not employing her. Community partners implementing a project like this also need to be comfortable with programmatic flexibility and ambiguity during the developmental phase. In order to include youth in authentic decision making and build aspects of a program based on youth input, the adult staff must be committed to Positive Youth Development Principles and be willing to alter the implementation if necessary and defend such alterations to the community and funders. This is not a rigid curriculum or prescriptive set of concrete steps. The community needs to be involved in shaping this type of project.

**b. Skillsets, knowledge, and expertise needed by the implementing organization, partners, and stakeholders:**

Organizations, community partners, and stakeholders on a project like this need to be passionate about and committed to youth empowerment and development as well as community organizing and social cohesion. It is also important that they have the ability and willingness to listen, engage others, and the flexibility to pivot when necessary. An understanding and appreciation of the value of evaluation is also important, although the methods may look different in each community, depending on how the youth shape the project. Organizational support, even in times of ambiguity or challenge, is crucial. Staff implementing this type of project need the support to take risks. There is not always broad social support for giving youth power in meaningful ways, and there will likely be points where established systems are not comfortable with that concept. In addition, although this type of project can be sustained as an embedded structure within a

youth-serving program once firmly established, it requires adequate funding and staffing to put into place.

**Publications:**

DeCosta, S., Crichton, A. (2017, September). Moving to the Outer Layers of the Social Ecological Model: Primary Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence and One Community's Evolution of their "Youth Empowerment Zone." Poster session presented at the National Conference for Domestic Violence and Health, San Francisco, CA.