

Youth Advocacy

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Youth Advocacy is a framework of action based on human rights principles when working with young people. Its principles and current outcomes clearly indicate that not only does it attempt to prevent juvenile crime but it creates opportunities for young people to take responsibility in addressing life issues.

The Concept of Youth Advocacy

Definition

The overall thrust of Youth Advocacy is to empower young people in their everyday lives. Youth Advocacy attempts to provide support to young people in all areas that affect them, be it education, housing, employment, unemployment, health, social security, recreation and human relationships. Youth Advocacy also gives to the young person insights into the adult world of decision making and the exercising of authority, and enhances the young person's understanding of legal process. This helps the young person to make clear choices about issues that affect their everyday life. Youth Advocacy can assist young people to use the existing social systems to develop a real sense of self-worth. Thus, young people are in a better position to be responsible for themselves and more able to deal with society's demands.

Youth Advocacy is an established framework for workers to use with young people across all social levels. Its emphasis is to empower young people through their own actions in situations that affect them. Youth Advocacy is a reflection of the principles of human rights in practice.

Youth Advocacy aims to prevent the diminution of a young person's self-respect, caused by paternalistic and authoritarian attitudes of those people who have professional authority over the young person's life—teachers, lawyers, law enforcement authorities as well as well-meaning but misguided social workers, youth workers, probation officers and others within the helping professions.

The Process

Youth Advocacy processes include the following:

- Youth Advocacy is at all times a human rights approach with young people. This perspective rejects the welfare model which does not empower young people and at best still leaves the young person dependent on social structures.
- Youth Advocacy is most effective when established in local areas. If Youth Advocacy does not begin at the local neighbourhood level then young people will remain powerless.
- Youth Advocacy, by definition, operates on a conflict model that does not take responsibility for young people.
- Youth Advocacy provides the opportunity to young people to take responsibility—not for young people, but by and with young people.
- Youth Advocacy is a community development process which resources the local areas responsible for the delivery of youth services in education, law, employment, housing, health, transport and recreation.
- Youth Advocacy enhances collective development of young people, and workers with young people.
- To create a climate of Youth Advocacy we begin by establishing workers with youth networks at local and regional levels. Some workers establish strategies that will enable young people to participate in issues of relevance to them.
- Youth Advocacy is a long-term development and will not be put into an expedient time frame that suits politicians, professionals or parents at the expense of young people's development. It is essential to move at a pace conducive to the physical, psychological and emotional change that young people experience.

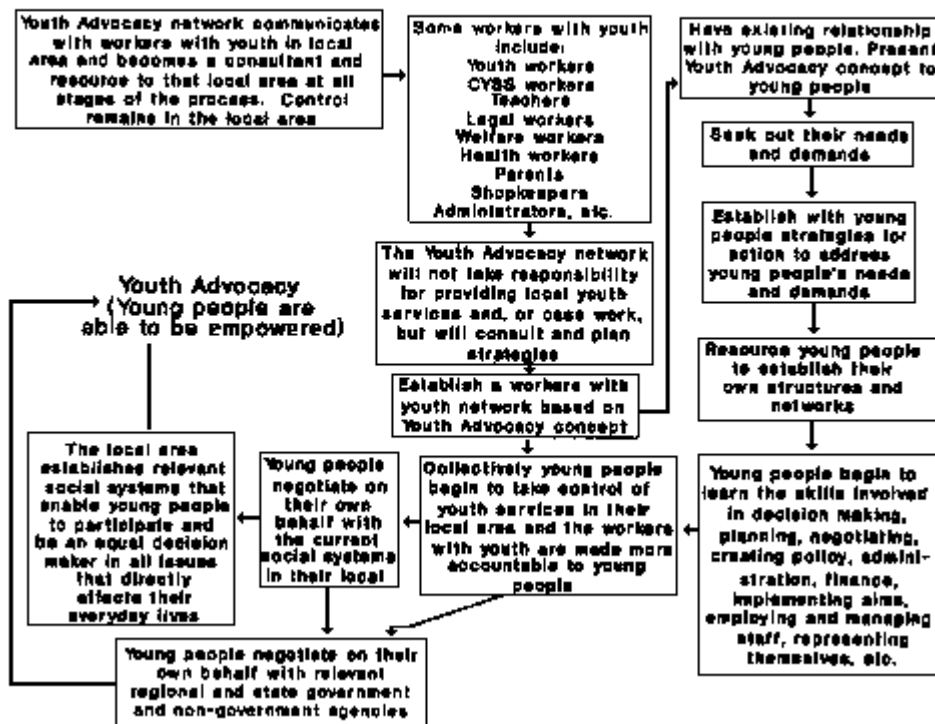
Youth Legal Advocacy

Youth Legal Advocacy interprets the young person's needs and feelings into a legal perspective and acts with instruction from the young person as their legal voice to parents, courts, tribunals, hearings, law enforcement agencies, other government and non-government authorities that have a mandate with young people (*see* Figure 1).

Empowerment

Empowerment of young people is when they have the major say over all the things that affect their everyday lives. Young people are rarely recognised as a group with the right to have their views considered or their interests independently represented at any level of decision making. Be it in Parliament where changes of legislation are made, in courts of tribunals where decisions are made about their future, at home where more often than not they have to obey their parents, and at schools where they are told what is best for them.

Figure 1
Flow chart: Creating a
Climate for Youth Advocacy



The denial of access to information and tangible decision making by the majority of people in our society, are clear indications that collectively we are not empowered. Establishing empowerment as the major objective in the education process of young people is essential. When young people taste the processes and implications of empowerment they will be in a good position to reflect the principles of human rights.

Inequality is a foundation stone of our society. Substantial injustice exists in income security, housing, health, education, transport, property, recreation, gender, race, class, information and decision making. Our society has established structures that are dehumanising; and then wonders why young people are negative and ambivalent. People have not come to terms with each other, are reluctant to share their resources, and have become skilled in reactive codes of behaviour. Society gives scant regard to human rights development, and when challenged reacts. To be challenged, or in conflict may lead to struggle which at times is very difficult. Yet through challenges, we all learn a lot about ourselves and about life. Why then do we avoid conflict? Human nature? No, it's our conditioning which has not equipped us to struggle. We have not learned our human rights, nor how to exercise them. The principles of human rights are far better reflected by people who challenge people. The majority of us hold back, we do not say what we really feel, we retain our knowledge and fail to exercise a fundamental human right, the right to be heard, and the right to participate.

Young people need to be included in the decision making processes of life issues that affect them. Young people need to experience taking responsibility to know the potential of empowerment. If young people are shown, learn and are encouraged by adult society to take control over their own lives, then there is every chance that they will be empowered adults.

Brief Outline of Victorian Youth Advocacy Network

The Victorian Youth Advocacy Network is an independent non-government statewide organisation that focuses on young people and their human rights. It was formed in December 1985 after formerly being known as the Victorian Youth and the Law project. The Network was established as an outcome of extensive statewide consultations and overseas research which clearly stated that youth advocacy needed to be established. Its origins came from legal workers and youth workers involved in the Community Legal Centre movement in Melbourne, and young people.

They were all concerned about the way legal issues and legal process were addressed in relation to young people. There were eighteen Community Legal Centres, plus the Victorian Legal Aid Commission, the Aboriginal Legal Service, and various legal advice and referral services provided through Citizens Advice Bureaux in Victoria during 1983. Even though there appeared to be many options for young people to gain legal assistance, the existing structures of legal aid were unable to meet the demands of young people who were seeking more than legal advice and representation. They wanted to participate in the legal process and gain access to legal knowledge that would empower them in their everyday lives.

Current aims of the Network

The aims of the network are, where possible to implement the concept of Youth Advocacy in various local areas throughout Victoria with particular emphasis on resourcing young people and workers with young people to develop:

- practical understanding of their human and legal rights;
- understanding of the legal and social consequences of drug and alcohol abuse;

- understanding of legal issues identified by them as affecting their everyday lives;
- capacity to make full use of the administrative, industrial, and legal methods available to them to ensure that they are not treated unjustly;
- participation in the decision making processes that affect their everyday lives, especially participation by those young people most disadvantaged or most at risk of becoming entangled in the criminal justice system; and
- to establish programs and structures that protect and develop young people's human rights at a local, regional and state level.

Structure

The Network is administered by a Management Committee which is elected at an annual general meeting by its membership. The Management Committee is responsible for overall planning, direction and implementation of programs, staff management, various sub-committees and financial accountability.

Youth Committee

The Youth Committee is comprised of young people from local areas involved in the Network. The Committee is accountable to young people in local areas and provides a voice for young people in the Network's structures. It aims to resource and support young people on all aspects of management responsibilities and skills required to operate the Network.

By late 1989 the Youth Committee will form a minimum of 50 per cent of the Management Committee.

Local areas that are part of The Network are: Morwell, Churchill, Dandenong, Doveton, Richmond, Broadmeadows, Camberwell, Fitzroy, Heidelberg, Sunbury/Bulli, Flemington, Footscray, Williamstown, Northcote, Brunswick, Collingwood, Frankston, Bacchus Marsh, Melton, Moe, Wangaratta, Diamond Creek/Hurstbridge, Colac, Ballarat.

In these local areas young people are, in the main, in control of their own organisations, and direct their own programs. The majority of young people involved are under the age of 18 years and some groups employ their own salaried youth workers.

State Youth Advocacy Conference

An annual state youth advocacy conference is planned, organised and run by the Youth Committee. The Network's operating mandate is established at the conference. The conference in 1989 was held on the Queen's Birthday weekend where more than 165 young people participated, and thirty-five workers with youth were available as resources, but had no voting rights. Various human rights issues were addressed and twenty-three workshops were held.

Other activities of the Youth Advocacy Network

- Production of a quarterly newsletter;
- participation in National Youth Advocacy Conference;
- production of a 24-hour Youth Lawline Kit;

- focus on substance use and abuse issues;
- establishment of a Young People's Public Transport Needs Study;
- provision of a local area resource worker;
- provision of legal information on issues relevant to young people, such as recent legislation of *Children and Young Persons Act 1989*, *Crimes (custody and investigation) Act 1988*, *Crimes (fingerprinting) Act 1988*, *Education (work experience) Act 1989*;
- provision of a resource library on youth and law issues;
- provision of a project workers pool to resource local areas in various knowledge and skills development programs;
- participation and training of various statewide groups and organisations in youth empowerment processes; and
- employment of a small team of salaried workers made up mainly of part-time workers and trainees.

Funding sources

The Network has broadened its funding base in recent times having had a chequered history. Its recent expansion lifted its public profile which is stimulated by substantial increase in involvement of young people at all levels of its activity.

Current funding is received from:

- Youth Affairs Division, Department of Labour, Victoria;
- Health Department, Victoria;
- Brotherhood of St Laurence; and
- Transport Department.

Youth Advocacy Action

Preventing youth crime only partly answers the social and economic inequities experienced by many young people. The double standard set by the adult controlled society they live in causes them to become confused, have less sense of self-worth and this creates a need to belong and become recognised. Often anger, frustration and unhappiness results in acting out which leads to criminal behaviour.

Young people then learn that this society sets standards that blame the individual rather than addressing the underlying causes. Current social systems show many young people how careless and powerless adult structures are.

Young people have the capacity, the energy and the right to take responsibility and experience decision making in the life issues that affect them. Young people also have the right to be taught life skills and social skills so that they can become empowered adults.

Adults have so little trust of themselves or their young people that they are not prepared to take risks and consequently fail to create opportunities for young people to take responsibility.

Flemington Youth Empowerment Project (YEP)

The Flemington Youth Empowerment Project is an exciting new initiative based on the concept of Youth Advocacy. Since its inception in August 1986 it has established itself as a very influential organisation in the Flemington area and in the wider youth affairs sector.

Flemington is a northern inner urban area densely populated with large numbers of economically disadvantaged families and high unemployment. The area is typical of most inner urban areas in large cities, having a large migrant population including Turks, Spaniards and Indo-Chinese. The majority of families live on large public housing estates that are high-rise and low-rise concrete jungles.

The aims of the project are:

- to provide young people with as much information as possible on services available to them;
- to involve young people in determining their own recreational activities;
- to educate and train young people in life rights;
- to train young people so they can support, inform and educate other young people and refer to each other in crisis situations; and
- to encourage young women and young men to assert their rights as independent people.

The Management Group consists of young people and parents of participants. At this stage twenty-one people are involved in this capacity: three parents and eighteen young people. The young people are representatives of larger peer groups within the Flemington area covering a wide range of nationalities, gender and age. It is the role of these representatives to inform their larger peer groups of projects that the Youth Empowerment Project is implementing in order to inform and involve other young people.

The Flemington YEP:

- gained funding from private trust and government grants often generated by young people who formed their own delegations to funding sources;
- employed their own youth workers;
- ran their own drop-in youth centre;
- trained young women in a health right education program and paid them to educate other young women;

- established a recreation fund and provided grants to young people to run a variety of recreational programs;
- established a life rights program and distributed a variety of legal education materials to schools and natural meeting places in Flemington area;
- produced a youth Lawline right card for young people when dealing with the police;
- jointly established a youth Lawline, a 24-hour telephone emergency service for young people who have been arrested by police and are in need of a lawyer to be in attendance at the police station, or those seeking legal assistance when in crisis;
- provided a resourcing role to other local areas wanting to establish similar youth advocacy programs;
- ran various workshops at state and national youth affairs conferences;
- holds various workshops to learn about assertiveness, decision making, management operations, financial management and fundraising;
- provides input into youth policy of the Melbourne City Council;
- is in the process of producing 'Where You Stand', a work kit for young people in the Flemington area. The kit is designed to inform young people of their employment rights, for example; and
- participates in the Network's management structures.

Comments

A contributing factor in YEP's achievements is that the workers with youth in their area and their own youth workers resource and support the young people to take responsibility. The workers also create choices with young people, but are not the decision makers in the YEP's operations, only young people are. It is also interesting to note that many of the young people involved are wards of the state or in foster care.

Another side effect worth mentioning is that their treasurer Tanner, a fifteen-year-old Turkish boy was taught how to keep financial books, invest funds and prepare budgets. More than twelve months ago he became a financial adviser to more than twenty-eight Turkish families living in the high rise Public Housing Estates of Flemington. Tanner is now seventeen but continues to advise them on such matters as investment of monies and budgets.

Alphaline

By 1984 many young people in Brunswick, a northern inner suburb of Melbourne were most concerned about the treatment they were given when dealing with the police. They had been expressing their concerns for some years, but no matter what attempts had been made, some young people were demanding more tangible legal support. A small number of local youth workers, and some legal workers from the Fitzroy Legal Service began to meet with these young people.

The young people then created their own group called Alpha Task Force. They chose this name as it reflected their intended action: Against Lawless Police Harassment Action Task Force. As a consequence funding was obtained from the Division of Youth Affairs, Victoria, to establish Alphaline, a 24-hour, seven days a week emergency telephone service for young people who are arrested and taken to a police station. The service is operated by the Fitzroy Legal Service under the direction of Alpha Task Force. Over thirty lawyers volunteer their time by staffing a roster, and use a resource kit which includes a telephone bleeper, instruction guidelines and Client Information Forms, referral agency and listings. Alphaline also provides an information card which provides instructions to young people if they are arrested by the police and taken to a police station. Alphaline has been used heavily by young people, is popular with them, and other telephone services of this type have begun to operate in other local areas in Victoria. The Alphaline card was designed by young people. An important resource of the Alphaline venture are the Brunswick Municipal Youth Workers who have established an administrative resource for the planning and implementation of various youth work initiatives in the Brunswick area.

This 24-hour, seven day a week emergency telephone service for young people arrested and taken to the police station, came under continuous attack from the conservative adult sections of society that exist in our society. The Victorian Police Force refused to cooperate, claiming that the plastic information card provided to young people, gives advice unacceptable to the police. The 'Don't Blab' statement highlights the card, and the media had continually published statements from not only the police, but also the Police Association and other critical comments from individuals. Questions concerning the card were raised in Parliament. Much debate occurred at Brunswick City Council about the card. Much of this 'hype' was triggered by the police, and the change in political climate within the Brunswick City Council. As a consequence, the Brunswick Council directed that Alphaline card was not allowed to be distributed on Council property, and that the Council staff were not allowed to distribute the card whilst employed by the Brunswick Council.

Various meetings were called by the young people and the Fitzroy Legal Service, local youth service agencies, and representatives from YACVIC, YDWD, and The Network. The municipal Youth Workers were not allowed to participate! The young people sought to lift the ban and therefore decided to challenge the Council, who were most reluctant to meet with them. The young people drew up a petition and within two weeks gained over 400 signatures, many of which were from local shopkeepers, many other local adults and young people.

The young people then produced a press release which made the whole of the front page of the local newspaper, the 'Brunswick Sentinel'. Eventually, the Brunswick Council agreed to meet the young people, who presented their own case and agreed to review the working of the card with various people, but would not do so until the ban imposed by the Council was lifted. As a consequence the Council re-voted on the issue, but decided, on a very close vote to retain the ban.

Continuous pressure from various State Youth Organisations, VCOSS, Legal Aid Groups and The Network, through the form of letters to Council, media statements, and discussion with politicians occurred.

Since then five other youth law lines have been established, and in recent times most adult sections of society accept services of this type. Some have recently had to close due to lack of a sound funding base. This issue is most relevant when debating juvenile crime in preventative terms, and raises questions about who really are the perpetrators of crime and who really are the victims?