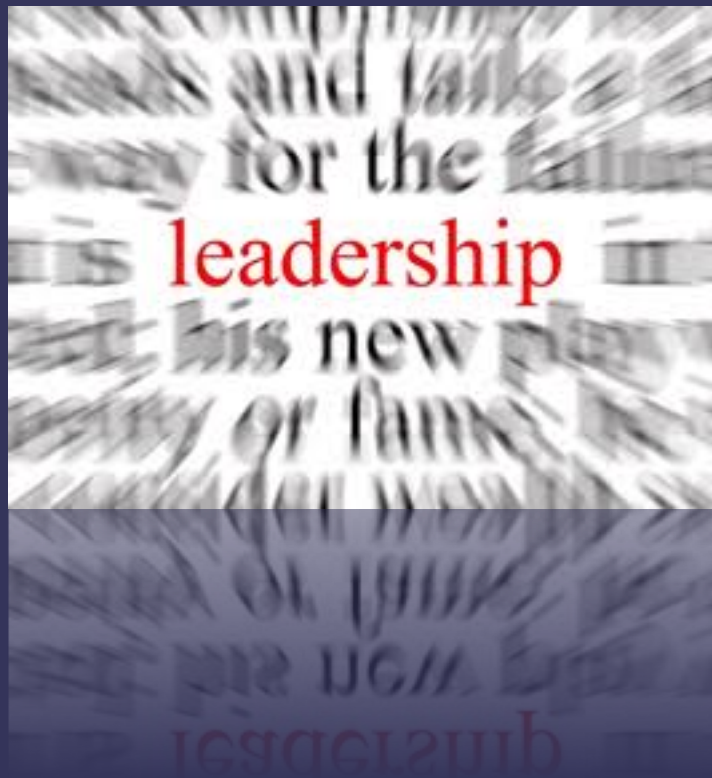


YOUTH REPORT

# Pointing the Way to Leadership



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June 2012

## Youth MOVE and Youth Leaders

Leaders are people who create change. Youth MOVE Massachusetts is a growing, youth-led group that advocates for youth to use their power and expertise to foster change in their community and in their own lives. Youth MOVE Massachusetts members range in age from 13 to 24 years old and many are involved with state agencies including juvenile justice, mental health, and child welfare. Most receive or have received special education services. Group members are also diverse and describe themselves as Latino, Haitian, Polish, Native American, African American, Asian, Hmong and white.

One of the primary goals of Youth MOVE Massachusetts members is to speak about their experiences and be a force for positive change. Many of these young people have been active participants in public forums, been featured at several conferences and testified at legislative hearings. They have drawn upon their experiences of what it's like to be depressed, to be resilient, to feel isolated, to feel connected, to fail in school or

be hospitalized, to lose friends, to be laughed at and/or scorned. They also speak eloquently of how they are resilient, connected, triumphant and knowledgeable about the systems intended to serve them. They engage us, challenge us, inspire us and often, show us a better way. As Henry Miller, an American writer and painter, wrote "The real leader has no need to lead--he is content to point the way." Youth are pointing the way.

## The Challenge: Defining Youth Leadership

In August and September 2011, youth leaders conducted two structured focus groups to explore what leadership means. Youth leaders designed questions and facilitator tools and gathered 18 youth and young adults from across the state as participants. As one noted, "We represented many different communities in Massachusetts. Our focus groups included youth and young adults in locked programs. We had youth that were in community residential programs, lived at home, in foster care and also homeless." Youth led the focus groups, wrote the moderator's guide and reported the results.

They began by thinking about leadership and named people they saw as inspirational or charismatic. Most were figures who changed history (e.g., Martin Luther King, Ghandi) or current entertainers (e.g., Lady Gaga, Eminem). They also identified traits they saw in leaders and in themselves such as standing up for what you believe in, a willingness to tell your own story, bravery, originality and being true to yourself. They noted that leaders inspire others and sometimes wrestle with ethical decision-making. Several said that leaders are aware of their pasts and learn from it, becoming stronger in the process.

They explored the traits that strong leaders possess and that youth need to achieve their own goals. These fell in two large groups. The first were traits such as



perseverance, self-advocacy, loyalty, humor, respect, ability to communicate well, ability to manage your anxiety and anger (self-regulation), being true to yourself, patience, self-awareness, knowing yourself and valuing yourself. The second group

included learned skills such as managing treatment, budgeting, listening and people skills and learning how to drive. Each youth who participated was working on the first set of traits and reported that they were mastering them. Not all youth, however, were working on the second group of

learned skills.

Many standard definitions of leadership include working with others, building consensus and communicating with followers. Most youth didn't identify these qualities, focusing instead on integrity, humor and self-awareness. As

one noted, “Leadership to me is being real, being safe and being respectful. That’s enough.”

## Growing Into Leadership

Being seen as a leader can be a pivotal experience for youth. Becoming a leader includes gaining new skills, creating new relationships, understanding and interacting better with the community and seeing your own potential. It can also include acquiring a sense of status, the power to influence and gaining self worth.

Focus group participants explored what had helped them become someone who could lead and make a difference. Many of their answers focused on people who had played an important role in that process. Most youth spoke of the large role their family had played and some youth talked about people who believed in them or said they would be okay. “I would not be here today if I did not have my family to support me. They stood by me,” said one teen. Other youth talked about therapists or teachers who had

helped them grow into leaders. One youth said, “I think it is crucial to have people in your life that are “real” leaders. They have to be honest and “get” what we are going through.” Another responded, “My best support was the teachers that “got me.” Got me by not judging me.”

Other factors that youth identified include reflecting on the past and actively learning from those experiences. Still others said that literature or music played a role. “Music and friends got me through a lot,” said one participant.

## Biggest Challenges

Becoming a leader has its challenges, especially for youth with emotional and mental health needs. Youth identified their greatest challenges, many of which impacted their confidence in themselves and in the world. A large number outlined experiences involving their personal relationships. These included losing family or close friends or a therapist who had hurt rather than helped. Others simply categorized it as “trouble with parents.” One youth said, “My biggest

challenge was losing who was supposed to lead me – my birthparents. I have had to find leadership on my own.”

Other youth cited challenges such as dealing with medications, mental health challenges and developing social skills as barriers to becoming the leader they knew they could be. “My hardest challenge in being who I am is lack of self confidence,” one teen replied.

## Opportunities for Leadership

Youth development is an approach that stresses certain critical experiences for youth. More than 40 years of youth development research has identified the conditions—called “supports and opportunities” in the research literature—that contribute to youth being able to develop into self sufficient, caring and contributing adults. The five key supports and opportunities are:

- caring adult relationships
- emotional and physical safety

- opportunities to participate
- a connection with the community
- opportunities to develop meaningful relationships

Each of these supports and opportunities is an important component of the entire experience that youth need.

Youth leadership gives youth opportunities to develop partnerships with adults and other youth, connect with the community, develop and practice skills, make decisions, and act on their ideas. In spite of what we know about the importance of youth leadership, our society does not do a good job of engaging youth in leadership roles.





Focus group participants listed the ways in which they had been a leader and discussed how important these experiences had been. All were looking for more opportunities. One youth said, “We all have issues. It is what you do with it and how unique your message is.” Another stated, “I need to fight back to show the world what I can do. That is what will make me a leader.”

Youth listed opportunities at school, including mentoring someone else as a meaningful leadership experience. Some spoke of the times their family “needed me to step up and be the older brother.” Still another told of a time when staff at his program asked him to help someone else. Sometimes participation in community programs such as joining the United Way, participating in local theatre or another community group were identified as places where youth could be leaders. More traditional academic



opportunities such as National Honors Society were also listed. Upon reflecting on her experiences, one youth noted, “I have to remember where I came from. It was the way to get me here.”

## Transitioning to Adulthood

As youth prepare to become adults, their role in their own life changes. They assume more responsibility for themselves, make their own decisions and manage their lives. While not all youth will choose jobs that require leadership, they will all become leaders in their own lives.

When youth were asked about the steps into adulthood, many said that mastering the small steps was what was most important. They noted that it gets difficult at times. One youth stated, “I have to work today to be a leader.” Another said, “Patience and being sure of your self is the beginning.

The rest will follow.” Most youth identified the age to begin acquiring these skills for transition as 16.

When asked to identify the most important things they needed to become stronger leaders, youth overwhelmingly identified skills – skills they already had and wanted to strengthen as well as skills they sought to acquire. Following closely was the need for support and partnerships with adults and other youth.

## Conclusions

Providing youth with leadership opportunities can bring benefits to everyone: adults, community organizations, schools, state agencies, churches and, of course, youth. Youth bring a fresh perspective, unconventional thinking and increased energy. Youth gain new skills, forge new relationships and begin to understand their own potential.

Youth faced with emotional and mental health challenges have a more arduous journey. They must develop skills to manage their often-turbulent lives while acquiring the skills to transition to adulthood.

They often find adults in their families, in school or elsewhere to support them. Many learn to be self-reflective and accept support from their peers. This process emphasizes the development of leadership skills such as integrity, humor and self-awareness perhaps more than communication or other team building skills.

Youth saw themselves as leaders and recognized their own accomplishments, often in spite of a lack of self-confidence. They also identified the need to build skills that would help them in their present and future lives. They looked for opportunities to experience being a leader and develop inner strengths. Many expressed enthusiasm over their ability to tell their own story and share their vision of the future. They realized that they have a unique perspective and often-unexpected voice. “You have to meet me where I am at, one youth said, not where you think I need to be.”

## Thanks and acknowledgements

This project was designed by youth and young adult leaders of Youth MOVE Massachusetts, who themselves have lived experience with emotional and mental health needs. While most have faced mental health issues themselves, some have been siblings and others are children of a parent with mental health challenges.

We are very grateful to the following people:

Thank you to Lisa Lambert for believing in us and teaching us how to create the wonderful tools needed to hold a structured focus group. Many, many thanks to our youth coordinator, Lydia Proulx, for being a constant positive role model!! Thank you to Chandra Watts, Maggie Breault, Katelyn Chapdelaine-Comptois, Dani Walsh and the many youth, teens and young adults that believe in our mission. Heartfelt thanks to Rich Breault, from the Department of Mental Health—your dedication to us is huge!

**Youth MOVE Massachusetts** is a youth led national organization devoted to

improving services and systems that support positive growth and development by uniting the voices of individuals who have lived experience in various systems including mental health, juvenile justice, education, and child welfare. We are a chapter of Youth MOVE National.

**Youth MOVE Massachusetts** is also a subsidiary of the **Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL)**. PPAL is the leading public voice for families whose children have emotional, behavioral and mental health needs in Massachusetts. PPAL is the statewide chapter of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health and is dedicated to promoting change what will improve the children's mental health system statewide.

This project was funded by a Statewide Family Network grant from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.





