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“Citizenship and Social Accountability: Encouraging Democratic Participation through Youth Civic Engagement,” Hampton, Virginia

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What was the problem?

Before the inception of the Youth Civic Engagement project, the problem facing the Hampton, Virginia, municipal government was this: although young people often have a strong desire for social action, they may not have the strategies or experience to begin contributing to community problem solving. Without a focused framework for involving youth in community planning, young people may turn to juvenile crime; they may also feel disenfranchised from their community representatives. Young people are disproportionately involved in, and affected by, community problems; likewise, city officials and community leaders often do not know how to begin involving youth in redressing these issues, since recruitment and employment may require non-traditional communication methods.

What was the innovation?

In order to encourage young people to serve others, to influence decisions in their own municipality, and to gain leadership and work experience, the City of Hampton initiated the Youth Civic Engagement model in the early 1990s. This model involves three levels: first, service, including short-term, meaningful volunteer opportunities to introduce a broad range of youth throughout the community to strategies of civic engagement. The second aspect of the model is influence: with training, young people can participate in a variety of advisory roles that provide valuable information to schools, city government offices, and various government-led service providers. Finally, the Youth Civic Engagement model relies on shared leadership. Youths can serve in positions of responsibility and as voting members on city boards and committees, where they contribute to creating policy. Two youth representatives are also employed in the planning department to develop the youth-oriented component of the City of Hampton’s comprehensive plan. The full system of the Youth Civic Engagement community change process came online in 1996, and has been in operation for ten years.

What obstacles did you face?

The biggest obstacle to youth-oriented programs, which we have encountered to some degree and which has been more serious in other cases, is attitudes, both of adults and of youth in the community. Adults often do not believe that young people have anything to contribute to, or want to take part in, community service. For their part, young people are sometimes genuinely apathetic, and often assume that adults will not be receptive to their opinions and efforts.

What were the planned versus actual results?

When we began this process of community change, we had no real sense of what the end results would be. Since instituting the full Youth Civic Engagement model in 1996, we have had many meaningful, interesting conversations with young people, which have far outstripped our expectations. I would like to cite a few examples: youth representatives have developed, secured approval, and implemented a Youth Component to Hampton's Comprehensive Plan (the first of its kind in the country). They have allocated over \$150,000 through their grant program to more than 75 different services and opportunities that address the issues identified in the Youth Component of the Comprehensive Plan. Young people in Hampton have developed recommendations and received Council approval for a 26,000 square foot, \$3.9 million teen center. They have also hired a marketing company to produce a video to raise money and support to offset the costs of the teen center.

Cindy Carlson is Director of the Hampton Coalition for Youth, one of the recipients of the 2005 Innovations in American Government Award from the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. As a department head, she is responsible for long-range and strategic planning for youth and families, and for the implementation of Hampton's youth development agenda. Before her service in municipal government, Ms. Carlson spent seventeen years as a manager in a nonprofit substance abuse prevention and treatment agency. She is the author of several journal articles on youth engagement and training curricula, and has also written a manual on establishing a successful youth commission, Shaping the Future: Working Together, Changing Communities. She holds a Master of Education degree in Guidance and Counseling from Edinboro University, Edinboro, Pennsylvania.