

Incorporating Youth into Substance Abuse Prevention Program Development

Introduction

Program development is a dynamic process and requires constant revision to ensure program effectiveness. Program development strategies involve a series of steps – identifying a situation and priorities, having input, creating outputs with activities and participation and achieving outcomes or an impact. Program developers take into account the various stakeholders who will be affected by a program (Program Development, 2004).

Research indicates that it is effective to involve the audience in program development (Dietz, 2001). It has also been found that engaging youth in program development can make long-term programs more effective. Having a youth perspective can help address key issues that might not be known to different generations; getting insight into the youth population will help identify that generation's values and associated behaviours. It is also vital to the development of drug abuse prevention programs, and health promotion programs in general, to involve the program target audience in the needs assessment, program development, design and evaluation of the concerned programs. Incorporating youth into the decisions that affect them serves to improve the effectiveness of health promotion strategies.

When youth are involved, they feel that they have a voice, are respected and appreciated; they participate and are empowered by their own decisions. They are prime candidates for identifying youth issues, problems and solutions. Youth involvement can help make the process more dynamic and more likely to target the appropriate needs for the population. Having youth identify priorities means that the real concerns can be addressed, those that otherwise may have gone unnoticed. This enhances their self-esteem and satisfaction and helps them teach other youth. It also emphasizes a concept of shared government between the youth and program developers, which leads to more sustainability of the programs for longer periods of time (McCall & Shannon, 1999).

The Council on Drug Abuse (CODA) strives to develop and promote programs that meet the needs of, and relate to, a youth population. Following the approach outlined above, CODA consults youth representatives at all stages of program development and management.

Needs Assessment

In developing their new Prescription and Over-the-Counter (Rx/OTC) substance abuse program, CODA professionals rely on youth advisors to indicate the relevancy of this new program in their respective areas. As substance use and abuse vary cross-regionally, involving youth in the initial needs assessment and research stages of program development is useful. It facilitates identifying what kind of drugs are used outside of their designed medical purposes, and which drugs are more readily available and in demand by youth, and in which areas. In addition, youth advisors are key sources to understanding the methods by which prescription drugs are diverted from pharmacies, physicians and prescribed users and into the hands of dealers and non-medical users and abusers.

Let There Be Youth!

Program Design and Development

Recognizing the importance of engaging youth in the design, development and implementation of programs targeted at them, CODA involves youth in program development via its Youth Advisory Council (YAC). The YAC is a network of regional youth CODA representatives who act as an advisory body to help CODA assess the relevancy of their educational preventive drug abuse programs to youth, in their respective regions.

As delivery to youth is the primary function of CODA programs, YAC advisors influence the way in which programs and events are delivered, identify what concerns youth have and what issues need to be addressed.

In addition, youth will help identify those communication tools that best deliver CODA messages in the most effective and impacting way. For example, CODA identified the need for a creative and attention-grabbing visual learning tool that features youth, and to which youth can relate and understand. This need birthed the CODA 'Crossroads' video series. 'Crossroads' is a five-segment, drug-specific video series featuring various youth interviewed about their devastating descent into drug abuse. The 'Crossroads' series has proven to be an effective tool that enriches CODA programs and delivers to youth the information which they need in a format that they requested.

Program Evaluation

CODA also incorporates youth in the evaluation of their programs and educational tools. For example, after completing the Crossroads video series, CODA conducted a pilot study with more than 7,700 youth from their primary target audience of grades seven to nine. CODA gathered feedback regarding the degree to which the videos had an impact on them and enhanced overall program delivery. Response from those evaluations played an important role in editing the series, thereby producing a more impactful educational tool featuring youth that met the specific needs as identified by youth.

Conclusion

As demonstrated through these examples, involving youth in all stages of youth-targeted health promotion programs is instrumental to successfully designing, developing, delivering and evaluating effective programs. Following CODA's example, youth drug abuse prevention specialists and other health promoters need to incorporate youth in all stages of their program development to ensure program success, efficiency and efficacy.