

Policy Level Preparations for Using the Youth Competency Assessment (YCA) Instrument and Protocol, a Strengths-Based Approach

In order to successfully implement a strengths-based program using the Youth Competency Assessment tool and protocol, it is important that agency leadership pave the way with preparatory groundwork. The following are suggestions for that groundwork based on the experiences of the juvenile justice departments that piloted the YCA in Oregon in 2002-2003.

- ▶ Before training staff and implementing the YCA, the management staff members need to conceptualize the agency's strength-based vision and mission. This process should encompass any policy that may have been created around bringing this approach into the agency as a required part of the assessment process, including how they will use the YCA/strengths approach and how it will benefit the front line staff, the agency, and the youth they serve. This vision should be imparted to the staff prior to the initial training so that they are aware of its importance to the agency and to the work they will be doing in the future. Leadership must be supportive of this approach and encourage its adoption. Leadership must also be willing to recognize and change existing policies or practices that are found to inhibit the full implementation of a strength-based approach.
- ▶ Use a team approach. Having people who will really be using the assessment tool and process (i.e., probation officers, counselors) involved from the beginning in understanding the philosophy and in policy planning is very helpful. Valuable ideas come from this type of a team.
- ▶ Managers and supervisors need to be trained, fully understand the approach, and buy into it. They will be a support and a resource for counselors/probation officers as they incorporate this approach into their daily routine.
- ▶ Allowing plenty of room and opportunity for discussions (on a regular basis) is helpful for people learning new strategies and for working out questions, clarifying points of confusion, providing peer support, and generating ideas for how the process will best work in a particular agency.
- ▶ Determine where in your protocol of youth assessment the strength-based questions best fit. Are staff members required to address accountability issues at the beginning of the first meeting? In that case, accountability questions may be followed by youth competency questions. Is there flexibility in when to address various issues during the assessment process? In that case, the counselor/probation officer may want to begin with youth competency questions not only to gather information about the youth's strengths, but as an aid to building rapport at the outset of the youth's relationship with the agency and its staff.
- ▶ If possible, incorporate YCA questions into your existing assessment paperwork in order to ensure a smooth interview process that has a balance of accountability and strengths.
- ▶ Recognize that some staff members already look for strengths/have a strength-based approach, but that the YCA is a method of formalizing that effort and ensuring that those strengths are utilized to help youth toward a healthy life.

- ▶ A written list (paper and/or electronic) of community resources should be available to the counselors/probation officers to provide them with ideas and contacts that they can use to build on the strengths of the youth, especially when preparing the case plan.
- ▶ An on-site "resident strengths expert" who is well-informed about the strengths approach and how it is being used in the agency, and who has materials and information to share, will be a valuable resource and support for other staff who are using the youth competency assessment and approach.
- ▶ Refresher meetings should be scheduled monthly during the first several months of implementation so that staff will have an opportunity to discuss their problems and successes, and an opportunity to share examples of creative ways they are using to building on the strengths of the youth and contact information for any new resources they may have discovered.
- ▶ Provide information to judges, court personnel, and other related parties. A 1-page summary sheet is a good reminder aid, along with a mini-training on the strength-based approach. These stakeholders might even have suggestions about what they would like to see and what a strength-based interaction/service system might look like.
- ▶ Implementing a strength-based approach is most effective when it involves entire systems. Encourage dialogue with the community programs and providers that you work with, to inform them about the approach you are taking and why. Include providers in your trainings or help to facilitate training for them in another way. Expect services you refer to, and professionals you work with, to be open to learning about and implementing a strength-based approach as well. If they do not, consider using other providers.
- ▶ Schools are a critical partner. They also should be encouraged to learn about and incorporate strength-based principles. Social service staff can gain much cooperation from schools by working to support their difficult youth and families in the schools. For example, a probation officer who responds quickly by showing up at a school where a youth is acting in a disruptive manner, and intervening with that youth, can earn the trust, appreciation, and respect of school personnel.
- ▶ A strength-based approach is a way of empowering youth, families, schools, and other agencies to work in a positive way despite challenges.

Final reminder: The forms (assessment tool and associated materials) are not the essence of a strength-based approach, but they provide systemic consistency and a concrete reminder of the philosophy that is being adopted.