

Executive Summary

The complexity of the problems faced by disadvantaged youth is matched only by the complexity of the traditional Federal response to those problems. Both are confusing, complicated, and costly.

Ideally, we want the families and communities of young people to be able to supply all that they need—love, a secure childhood, adequate housing, access to health care, a good education, discipline of character, a sense of personal responsibility, and a commitment to their communities and their country. Most young Americans are raised in this kind of environment, and they grow up to be healthy, responsible, and productive citizens.

But there are children who have the same dreams for their own futures, whose daily realities make those dreams seem forever out of reach. The Federal government plays a significant role in helping to make up for those daily deficits for millions of disadvantaged youth.

Because of his commitment to the Nation's youth and to improving the effectiveness of Federal programs in general, the President created the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth on December 23, 2002.¹ He directed the Task Force to develop for his consideration a comprehensive Federal response to the problems of youth failure, under existing authorities and programs, with a focus on enhanced agency accountability and effectiveness.

Our Aspirations for Disadvantaged Youth

Our comprehensive Federal response begins with our Vision for Youth in the form of a national youth policy framework. This is an outcome-focused approach designed to express what we as a country want for disadvantaged youth and for all children. Namely, we want them to grow up:

- **Healthy and Safe**
- **Ready for Work, College, and Military Service**
- **Ready for Marriage, Family, and Parenting**
- **Ready for Civic Engagement and Service**

Our national youth policy framework is designed to ensure that programs we invest in meet one or more of these four goals.

The Task Force was organized into committees around these four guiding principles. Each committee was charged with developing recommendations to improve Federal disadvantaged youth programs under existing authorities. While they were each assigned to review a different subset from among the 339 Federal youth programs that we identified, each of the committees ultimately came to similar conclusions: **The best way to get the greatest outcomes for disadvantaged youth from the significant Federal funds invested was to focus on these four goals:**

- **Better Management**
- **Better Accountability**
- **Better Connections**
- **Give Priority to the Neediest Youth**

Better Management: Streamlining the Federal Response to Disadvantaged Youth

The Task Force developed a series of recommendations to address problematic management and coordination issues regarding the hundreds of Federal youth programs we identified. The recommendations in this section address some important issues that we discussed in our April, 2003 report, including problems with overlap and duplication as well as mission fragmentation. To begin to address these problems, we present a proposal for a Disadvantaged Youth Initiative, followed by recommendations on mission alignment, interagency coordination, and improving the Federal grants system.

Create a Disadvantaged Youth Initiative

Through the work discussed in our April, 2003 preliminary report, the Task Force identified the following issues that need to be addressed properly and as comprehensively as possible in order to increase the quality of Federal disadvantaged youth programs:

- Reduce/eliminate overlap and duplication of services;
- Focus policies and resources on Administration priorities;
- Maximize the use of expertise that agencies already have;
- Increase collaborative efforts;
- Keep public health messages to youth consistent across agencies and programs;
- Bring programs into the agency with whose mission they are most closely aligned;
- Improve the quantity and quality of program evaluations;
- Have a unified definition of “best practices;”
- Develop a unified research agenda to identify best practices;
- Encourage the development and use of similar performance measures for similar programs.

To properly address these issues, to help ensure that disadvantaged youth grow up to be healthy, productive adults, and to maximize the return on our Federal investment, the Task Force proposes the creation of a Disadvantaged Youth Policy Initiative, to be coordinated through the Executive Office of the President, to do the following:

- 1) **Develop and coordinate policy**, within existing policy processes and structures, to address the needs of disadvantaged youth;
- 2) **Maximize interagency collaboration** to use the significant expertise within specific Federal agencies;
- 3) **Coordinate Federal research** so we can fund programs that produce results that help disadvantaged youth;
- 4) **Find and elevate models of “what works,”** through collaboration and coordination with existing agency structures, and help replicate them nationwide.

MISSION ALIGNMENT

Through the process of identifying the 339 Federal youth programs, we encountered several programs that were located in departments whose mission did not provide a clear and compelling reason for locating them within that agency. Our recommendations below reflect the belief that, clearly, the youth programs belong in an agency whose mission more closely matches theirs.

Move YouthBuild to the Department of Labor and Better Align Youth ChalleNGe with the Department of Labor

The Task Force recommends that the Department of Labor assume administrative responsibility for the YouthBuild program, currently administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and work with the Department of Defense on better aligning the Youth ChalleNGe program with other youth programs funded by DOL. Each program is, at its core, an employment and training program for disadvantaged youth, and will benefit from administrative oversight in DOL within the Employment and Training Administration (ETA), since the strategic goals and mission of that department and agency align directly with the goals and mission of each program.

Move the Gang Resistance, Education and Training Program to OJJDP

The Task Force recommends that the Gang Resistance Education and Training Program, or “G.R.E.A.T.,” currently housed in the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, be transferred within the Department of Justice to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the Office of Justice Programs. This transfer would include technical assistance and other support resources, as well as the grants budget, and the basic content of the strategic plan. It will link G.R.E.A.T. into the many OJJDP programs designed to prevent gangs and violence and promote constructive behavior among young people.

INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

Interagency coordination should be accomplished around topic areas or special target populations. Where issue areas warrant the attention of multiple agencies, we recommend that an interagency group be created to ensure communication, coordination, and collaboration. The Federal government should also help facilitate interagency collaboration at the state and local levels as well, particularly since these levels of government receive the bulk of the Federal funds for youth-serving programs. The

following are two examples of recommendations that support this approach. There is an additional recommendation regarding interagency coordination in Chapter 5.

Improve Coordination of Mentoring Programs

The Task Force recommends the creation of a Federal Interagency Workgroup on Mentoring to engage in a variety of activities identified in the report that would aid the coordination and collaboration of all mentoring programs and activities supported by Federal agencies.

Support State and Local Community Planning Process

The Task Force recommends that the relevant agencies contribute existing funds to provide interagency support for state and local government efforts to assess youth-related policies, programs, funding streams, indicators, and data in order to create and implement strategic plans for coordinated investment of Federal, state, and local dollars to improve outcomes for youth.

IMPROVE THE FEDERAL GRANTS SYSTEM

The current Federal grants process is in need of improvements to increase its value to these specific audiences: potential grantees, Federal program officers, and policymakers within the executive and legislative branches. This issue is critically important to those who care about disadvantaged youth, for the more they can take advantage of the resources of the Federal government and maximize their effectiveness, the more likely it is that there are going to be better outcomes for the youth who need help the most.

The Task Force has developed a series of recommendations to improve this current system. Ideally, a searchable database of all past, present, and future grant activity would be created, which could then become the comprehensive database on discretionary grant spending in the United States. From our point of view, this will require a series of steps, which should include the following:

Modernize the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance

The Task Force recommends that the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) format be revised and updated to fit the way grants are currently administered. This would enable potential grantees as well as policymakers to

better track grant opportunities and related activities within youth-serving agencies.

Create a Centrally Available and Improved Grants Database

The Task Force recommends that the CFDA should be linked to various other databases which are currently available, and also made accessible through Grants.gov, the government-wide e-grants portal website.

Improve the FAADS Database

The Task Force recommends the following ways to improve the Federal Assistant Awards Data System (FAADS). First, include the EIN (employer identification number) as well as the DUNS² (Dun & Bradstreet, Inc., number) of each grant recipient. Both are unique identifiers and are required by statute and OMB policy to be submitted in applications for funding. Second, provide the key to the Federal Award Identifier Numbers provided by each agency so that the code can be understood by all. These changes will allow all users to identify specific grantees and determine which agencies and programs provided them with funds, and for what purposes.

Create a Resource Mapping Function for the Database

The Task Force recommends that grantees of all Federal youth-serving programs be required to provide the zip codes or GIS codes for all areas where they are providing services.

Research Eligibility of Faith-Based Grant Applicants

The Task Force recommends that the Department Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives review the data from our Federal Youth Programs Survey relating to the applicant eligibility of faith-based groups. The goal of these reviews is to determine the reasons for the reported apparent ineligibility of faith-based groups compared to nonprofit organizations, as reported by approximately half the Federal youth program managers. The Department Centers should then take any steps that they may determine are necessary to follow up with program officers within their agencies to ensure that it is clear that faith-based applicants are equally eligible to apply.

Better Accountability: Producing Results, Not Just Promises

Government likes to begin things – to declare grand new programs and causes. But good beginnings are not the measure of success. What matters in the end is completion. Performance. Results. Not just making promises, but making good on promises.³

President George W. Bush

The public policy world of youth programs suffers from a credibility gap. While there is the will among the public to help young people address the many difficult problems they face, there is a lack of consensus as to how to do it successfully. Unfortunately, the Federal government has been ineffective in helping to close that gap in the public's mind.⁴

Through the last four decades, there has been growing Federal involvement and a rapidly increasing infusion of funds designed to address numerous problems of youth, including substance abuse, violence, teen pregnancy, hunger and nutrition, school failure, and workforce preparation. In Fiscal Year 2003 alone, the Federal government is spending \$223.5 billion to help needy children and their families, focusing on these and related issues (see Appendix D). State and local governments and private groups will contribute billions more.

As the President has noted, the focus needs to be on achieving results. Part of the responsibility for this lack of focus on results lies in the fact that the Federal government has often made funding decisions without clear evidence that what it is attempting to do will actually work. Thus, public faith in the efficacy of social programs to successfully address youth failure has eroded. They wonder, what *really* works? How can we *know*? This is important because, as one researcher has noted, "even the most perfect solution, if there were such a creature, needs to be recognized and believed in, in order to be adopted as durable policy."⁵

This section of our report includes a number of recommendations providing a look at how the Federal government can strengthen its role in the area of research and evaluation of youth programs. With these recommendations, we call for the Federal government to develop and implement a coherent and comprehensive plan designed to identify with confidence and adopt those practices that will successfully help youth.

The focus of the Task Force here was in two areas, the importance of which should not be underestimated. First, we had broad consensus of the need to improve the Federal role in helping to understand what works. Second, we also recognized that with a Federal investment in youth-serving programs of hundreds of billions of dollars annually, we needed to firmly hold programs accountable for results showing that they actually achieve what they were designed to accomplish. This means that we need well-designed evaluations of current programs so that those not achieving their goals can be quickly discontinued and their resources diverted to other priority needs.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WORKS

The Task Force has developed several recommendations aimed at improving the quality of the information we have about what works to improve youth outcomes. The first recommendation (in several parts) addresses our concern that we create a more consistent set of guidelines for assessing the quality of program evaluations across agencies. The second puts forth a road map for guiding the direction of future Federally supported research on youth programs, and the third offers a suggestion on improving national survey data collection.

Develop a Unified Protocol for Federal “What Works” Clearinghouses

The Task Force recommends that a committee of the relevant Federal agencies develop a consistent approach to the assessment of youth program and policy evaluations, including the development of protocols. Random assignment experiments are considered the “gold standard” of evaluation because they can most clearly attribute outcomes to interventions. The Task Force strongly recognizes this gold standard and believes those evaluations should be given the greatest weight in shaping what we know about what works. Because individual agencies have different needs, the protocols to be developed need not be identical, just sufficiently consistent so that materials and findings can be shared among agencies with relative ease.

Build a Rigorous and Unified Disadvantaged Youth Research Agenda

The Task Force recommends that a cross-agency research agenda based on large, randomized field trials be created and implemented to assess the effectiveness of interventions to improve outcomes for disadvantaged youth. The design of these field trials must be based on comprehensive, systematic reviews of previous trials, and supported within existing program resources.

Improve Data Collected on the Well-Being of Families

The Task Force recommends that the Federal government seek opportunities to improve the quality of data collected on families in the national data collection systems in order to better monitor the well-being of families, track problems, identify how populations are changing, and provide direction with agenda-setting.

HOLDING PROGRAMS ACCOUNTABLE FOR RESULTS

Providing funds to grantees in order to support proven interventions does not in itself guarantee results. Youth programs must implement these programs correctly and must monitor their service delivery and program outcomes. Currently, similar youth programs rarely have similar performance measures in their Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) plans, and nearly half do not measure performance at all.⁶ In this section we present recommendations for developing and implementing common youth program performance standards and measures. We suggest that these will serve as a starting point for discussion and consensus-building among various stakeholders. This significant process, once completed, will allow policymakers to compare the outcomes of similar programs, no matter which agency they are in. It would also facilitate considerations of program consolidation, redirection of resources, and elimination of ineffective programs, where appropriate. In the interest of improving our ability to document the results of Federal investments, we also offer recommendations on addressing earmarks, and implementing the principles of the No Child Left Behind Act in Department of Defense schools.

Develop Standards for Measuring Grantee Performance

The Task Force recommends the development of uniform standards for measuring grantee performance for all Federal agencies that manage youth-serving programs. While it outlines a process for developing and implementing standard measures, the Task Force understands this is an ambitious goal and will likely require a sustained effort over time, including pilot testing and incremental implementation.

Implement Grantee-Level Performance Measurement Guidelines

The Task Force recommends launching a major effort to work with applicants and programs over the next several years to strengthen the accountability and performance of organizations receiving Federal funds to operate disadvantaged

youth programs. The Task Force believes an increased emphasis on performance measurement as both a program management tool and a means by which to communicate program impact will improve the effectiveness of youth-serving programs, while providing Federal agencies the necessary information to hold grantees accountable for results.

Conduct Rigorous Oversight of Earmarked Grantees

The Task Force opposes earmarks for youth programs because they significantly reduce accountability, and they exclude potentially higher quality projects that could otherwise successfully compete for funds. This weakens what should be a strong focus on proven, positive short-term and long-term results for children and youth. The Task Force recommends that each Department with earmarked youth programs use a vigorous, comprehensive oversight and accountability system to oversee these programs.

Implement No Child Left Behind in Department of Defense Schools

The President's landmark legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), provided a new focus on accountability for all of the Nation's children. School districts can no longer focus on average performance, they must now ensure that every subgroup, including disadvantaged students, is making significant progress toward proficiency. Thus, for the first time in our Nation's history, disadvantaged students will be of prime concern to school districts across America. This backdrop gives new leverage to Federal efforts to coordinate services for disadvantaged youth.

The Task Force recommends that the Department of Defense consider implementing select, relevant provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act in Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools, in conjunction with the Department of Education. Specific recommendations for consideration include: bringing the DOD system into line with NCLB provisions regarding the pillars of Standards and Accountability and a Focus on What Works; ensuring that the DoDEA strategic plan focuses on improving student achievement, particularly in the core subjects of reading and language arts and math; working to become a model of international excellence by implementing instructional practices that are based on rigorous scientific research; and assessing current levels of parental input and design mechanisms to further increase parental participation within the context of the "Parent Empowerment" pillar of NCLB.

Better Connections: Engaging Youth and Families

Research has shown that in order to ensure their healthy development, adolescents need caring adults in their lives; opportunities to learn marketable skills and maintain good health; and opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their communities and society.⁷ Generally, American families and communities are doing a good job of addressing these youth needs and opportunities. We make several recommendations aimed at validating and building on the strengths that exist in most families and communities. The first recommendation is born from the knowledge that parents play a pivotal role in guiding their children's development and should be supported in that role. The next two recommendations are aimed at providing opportunities for young people to contribute through service, recognizing the value of the assets they bring to their communities and to the Nation.

Increase Parent Involvement in Federal Youth Programs

The Task Force recommends that any Federal program that serves disadvantaged youth should endeavor, when appropriate, to involve parents as much as possible in the program. This means including parents in planning stages and in any advisory groups, as well as in the program itself.

Design a Youth Service Initiative

The Task Force recommends that a youth service initiative be designed that would allow older youth (college age) to display leadership by providing opportunities for them to serve children living in high poverty areas of the United States.

Recruit Youth for Federal Grant Review Panels

The Task Force recommends that college youth be recruited and included as participants on Federal panels that review youth program grants, where feasible.

Give Priority to the Neediest Youth: Caring for Special Target Populations

While the Federal government is spending billions of dollars to address the problems of youth, the problem is often that too many of these dollars are spread out among too many youth. Although these actions

may appear to be preventive, in fact it typically leads to under-serving or never even engaging the youth who most need help—and who become society’s most serious problems. Thus, we often see evaluations of youth programs that say the programs do not show much impact. One reason for this might be that the youth that needed to change were either not engaged, or not engaged sufficiently. At an aggregate level, the result is that the public and policymakers never see the kinds of significant improvement they want to see in the things that concern them: juvenile crime, school performance, drug use, and so forth.⁸

Public money should be spent on public problems⁹ and targeted to where it is most needed, rather than on all youth, most of whom will grow up just fine without government help. With this view in mind, we begin a discussion that shall continue beyond the life of the Task Force regarding the identification of “special target populations” of youth. These special target populations would be those who represent areas of serious concern, and who carry disproportionately negative consequences for youth and their communities if not addressed. It is these groups named below, as well as others who will be identified in the future, who should be the primary targets of relevant disadvantaged youth programs.

Target Youth in Public Care

The Task Force recommends that the first designated special target populations be youth who are already in public institutions, and who create public expense. These are foster care youth (particularly those aging out of foster care) and juvenile justice youth. For both these groups, the Federal government and governments at other levels are serving in loco parentis, in place of the parents.

Target Kids at High Risk

The Task Force recommends that a second group of youth also be considered among the special target populations. This subgroup includes youth with a high number of factors putting them at risk for unproductive or publicly costly lives, such as children of incarcerated parents and migrant youth.

The following recommendations represent a case study showing how the problems of a “special target population” could begin to be addressed. We emphasize that the recommendations below represent merely the first, early steps of this type of effort. Much more remains to be done, but we are excited about the possibilities that future cross-agency collaborative efforts hold for these groups of particularly needy young people. We also

note that we anticipate that other special target populations will be identified in the future.

Education of Foster Youth Demonstration Program

The Task Force recommends the creation of a program designed to improve the quality of education for school-age youth in foster care. The program would be established at three levels: Federal, state, and local. It would involve the appointment of a point of contact at the Department of Education to assist in providing awareness of the barriers faced by foster care youth to improving their educational success, and a plan to encourage that state and local school districts establish a similar position in their education departments. Funding for this program could come from the existing sources available to State Education Agencies and Local Education Agencies for disadvantaged youth.¹⁰

Federal Interagency Committee to Focus on Education Needs of Foster Youth

The Task Force recommends the establishment of a new, ongoing interagency committee which help improve Federal efforts to address the educational needs of youth in foster care. The committee should involve the appropriate representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor (Employment and Training Administration), and the Department of Education, and should plan to meet at least on a quarterly basis to ensure that the best efforts are put forth on the Federal level on behalf of these children.

Workforce Training and Education Services for Migrant Youth

The Task Force recommends the creation of a joint venture between the Department of Labor, the Department of Education, and the Department of Agriculture to develop a model program to provide workforce training and basic education services to out-of-school migrant youth ages 16-21.

This model would combine workforce development services, including job training activities, with basic education services designed for individuals with Limited English Proficiency, and would provide these youth with an integrated plan of services and activities designed to raise their educational skills and increase their employment opportunities.

Expand Mentoring Programs to Special Target Groups

The Task Force recommends that the newly-created Interagency Working Group on Mentoring seek opportunities to expand mentoring programs to provide support to young people in foster care and migrant youth.