

## **Organizational Overview**

The Resilience Advocacy Project combines youth leadership training programs with system-level advocacy initiatives to catalyze youth to work as agents of change in their communities. We have two types of youth leadership programs: curriculum-based (Youth LEAP, GO Girls, and Teen Fatherhood Initiative), and youth organizing (YouthVoiceNYC). Our current system-level initiatives include the *The Health Justice and Trafficking Initiative* and the *Teen Fatherhood Initiative*. An overview of each youth program and advocacy initiative is below.

RAP's theory of change is that fundamental transformation of the policies that perpetuate poverty requires both empowered youth and responsive systems. That is, young people must be engaged as partners in efforts to change their lives, improve their communities, and shape the policies and systems by which they are governed. But this is not enough. At the same time, the laws & policies impacting low-income youth must be truly responsive to the experiences, needs and priorities of young people when drafting and implementing laws and policies.

Ultimately, our vision is that poverty in one generation does not predict poverty in the next, and that all young people - irrespective of their race or income level - are able to access the resources and supports they need to chart their own destinies.

## **Curriculum-Based Youth Programs**

All of our curriculum-based youth programs follow the same arc. The beginning of each program is spent on community-building and broad discussions of systemic issues that impact the young people in the group. Group members spend the middle phase of the program discussing one specific topic area: they learn about their rights and discuss why this issue impacts them. The final phase of the group is the development of an Impact Initiative, in which group members take what they have learned and develop a project to push for change on that issue.

RAP establishes program sites through partnerships with community institutions throughout the city (e.g., schools, health centers, homeless shelters). At each site, the program partner recruits a cohort of 10-15 young people, and RAP provides trained facilitators (a combination of paid staff and volunteers) to run the workshops.

## **A. Youth LEAP**

Every day, we see examples of youth in poverty without access to basic educational supports succumbing to the types of crises that can undermine their efforts to move out of poverty and become economically stable later in life. In New York City last year alone, fewer than 50% of low-income teenagers graduated from high school on time, and among those in the lowest income communities, fewer than one third went on to college.

Systems and supports that can help the city's most disadvantaged youth move out of poverty – like academic tutoring, health care, quality after-school programming – do exist. Unfortunately, structural barriers like geographic isolation, confusing bureaucracies, and complicated program rules make it incredibly difficult to access these resources. Low-income youth frequently lack the tools they need to overcome these barriers, and as a result, thousands of young people every year miss out on the supports they need to develop the life skills that will help them succeed in school and make healthy choices.

Youth LEAP serves low-income middle- and high-school youth. We focus our efforts on youth populations that are most isolated from leadership development opportunities, including homeless youth, those in foster care, and those involved with the criminal justice system. We also target our partnerships in communities with the highest combined rates of youth poverty; poverty-related demographics (e.g., homelessness); and negative youth outcomes (e.g., school drop-out).

The goal of Youth LEAP is to give the most impacted youth themselves the tools to not only improve their own circumstances, but to also play a concrete leadership role in helping their peers and communities as well. Specifically, we provide our youth leaders with training in critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication, as well as access to a consistent source of adult support to help them navigate their ongoing life challenges. In doing so, we not only give them a problem-solving methodology and build their capacity for overcoming challenges in the short term, we also lay a strong foundation for long-term problem-solving and resilience.

### ***Program Strategies***

Youth LEAP uses two primary strategies:

1. **Leadership Training:** Youth begin with a series of 10 two-hour workshops. The workshops provide an overview of New York government and community structures; substantive and legal rights information; and training in leadership and advocacy skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, goal setting, and effective communication. As part of this training, teens identify a pressing community problem to which they want to respond. Examples of past issues include accessing support for victims of dating abuse, accessing funding for college, and accessing health insurance for homeless youth.
2. **Youth-Led Peer Advocacy Project:** The workshops culminate in the development and launch of a community-based peer leadership project at each program partner site. These leadership endeavors are designed to put the tools to respond to a pressing community need directly into the hands of young people. Projects have included, for example, youth-led community resource centers focused on helping homeless teens access educational supports; the development of a PSA video to educate teens about how to make healthy sexual choices; and youth-led community workshops focused on educating teens about their stop-and-frisk rights. All of these projects serve three purposes: (1) They demonstrate to youth that they can provide a concrete response to a real community need; (2) They give our youth hands-on practice in leadership roles; and (3) They provide a concrete service to youth in the partner school or broader community.

## **B. GO Girls**

Although many health resources exist in NYC, they are concentrated outside of the poorest communities. Poor communities, such as those in the South Bronx and central Brooklyn, have the fewest - and hardest to find - health resources for young women. Not coincidentally, these communities also have alarmingly disproportionate rates of teen parenthood, depression, dating violence, and substance abuse among teen girls. Consider these sobering statistics: According to the most recent NYC Vital Statistics, teen girls in New York's poorest community (Mott Haven) give birth at a rate twice the citywide average and are almost 14 times more likely to report receiving no prenatal care during pregnancy than teens in the wealthiest community (Upper East Side). NYC Department of Health data from 2010 reports that teen girls are twice as likely to report having unprotected sex as adult women, and that they are twice as likely as teen boys to be hospitalized from a suicide attempt.

At the root of this disturbing trend is the sheer isolation of low-income teen girls from what should be basic health information and resources. For example, the city's three poorest communities combined - Mott Haven, Hunts Point, and Morrisania - are home to only 2 health clinics. At the same time, the resources that do exist often require teens to navigate complex and overwhelming social service and government agencies. Even the savviest teens can become disempowered by the complicated paperwork required to sign up for health insurance, front-line health care workers who pass judgment about sexual habits, and strict program requirements that stand in the way of health classes. For example, many of the young women that we work with tell us that they will not ask a school nurse about birth control because when they have in the past, they have been counseled against having sex and made to consent to “counseling conversations” prior to receiving the requested information or resources. While talking with sexually active young women is a good thing, these young women explain that doing so in the intimate setting of a school, and within the context of a school counselor who also has relationships (and allegiance to) their parents, can feel coercive. Young girls want a neutral, safe space in which to have conversations about their sexual choices. Our GO Girls peer advocates are safe, peer-level sources of information about where to go for productive, healthy sexual advice from a doctor.

GO Girls serves low-income girls between the ages of 15 and 19 from all five boroughs. We target this age group because research shows that self-esteem drops significantly more for girls than for boys between the ages of 15 and 18. Our program builds self-esteem and a recognition of leadership abilities at precisely the time when such emphasis is most necessary for girls. Building their confidence as thinkers and leaders we provide an alternative source of pride to looks and sexuality. Our youth are primarily young women of color (98% Black and Latino).

Although we do not screen for program eligibility, we do focus our outreach efforts in two ways: (1) On *communities with the highest percentages of poor health outcomes* for adolescent girls, including for example, Mott Haven, Huntspoint, Brownsville, Bedford Stuyvesant, and East Harlem; and (2) On *populations with the highest rate of teen pregnancy and the lowest rates of high school and college success*. To do this, we partner with schools, the foster care system, and the homeless shelter system to ensure that our program reaches those girls who will benefit most from the program’s substance and life skill-building.

### ***Program Strategies***

GO Girls uses two primary strategies:

1. **Leadership and Advocacy Training:** Girls begin with a series of 10 weekly workshops. The workshops provide an overview of New York government and girls' health rights; as well as training in leadership and advocacy skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, goal setting, and effective communication. As part of this training, the girls conduct an extensive community mapping project and conduct interviews with health providers and advocates. This research serves as a foundation for both the development of their health justice resource center, and for their policy recommendation. We also explicitly link self-reflection to leadership development. Using activities such as life mapping, goal setting, and guided journaling (each girl receives a journal at the start of the program), girls learn to think deliberately and productively about their own personal challenges and triumphs. Leadership training becomes a framework for translating the lessons learned from those personal experiences into broader strategies that can guide long term personal growth and community change efforts.
2. **Youth-Led Peer Advocacy Project:** The workshops culminate in the development and launch of a community-based peer leadership project at each program partner site. These leadership endeavors are designed to put the tools to respond to a pressing community need directly into the hands of young people. Projects have included, for example, youth-led community resource centers focused on helping homeless teens access educational supports; the development of a PSA video to educate teens about how to make healthy sexual choices; and youth-led community workshops focused on educating teens about their stop-and-frisk rights. All of these projects serve three purposes: (1) They demonstrate to youth that they can provide a concrete response to a real community need; (2) They give our youth hands-on practice in leadership roles; and (3) They provide a concrete service to youth in the partner school or broader community.

## **C. Teen Fatherhood Initiative**

For every one of the city's 30,000+ unwed teenage mothers, there is a father, usually an adolescent or young adult himself. These young men have unique needs and challenges within the city's child support system that are not adequately addressed within the current system.

New York's child support documents, such as petitions, summons, modifications, and support orders, are extremely confusing and intimidating to a young person navigating a child support process on his own. They forms use technical legal language, such as "petitioner," "respondent," "assignee" and "assignor," which may make no sense without legal training or assistance; they refer to specific legal statutes without explaining their meaning or significance; and they contain frightening allusions to suspensions, warrants and arrests without accompanying explanation. Similarly, just as understanding court documents is confusing for undereducated and inexperienced young fathers, so is navigating a Family Court proceeding alone. Without assistance understanding the court's key stakeholders and their roles, the power dynamics and legalities in play, and the consequences of certain actions, teen fathers are simply ill-equipped to adequately self-advocate for their own best interests. The consequence of all of this: teen fathers are disproportionately served with debilitating child support arrearages and default judgments for missing court dates. For example, close to 1 in 4 teen dads owes between \$2000 and \$9000 in past due child support, simply because they were not able to advocate for an initial amount that they could afford.

At the root of these problems is the fact that the vast majority of these young men - over 90% of non-custodial fathers - must attempt to handle these challenges without the help of an advocate. The city needs an entirely new child support system for young parents. One that takes into account their substantively different emotional, educational and employment needs, their unique challenges, and their life experiences as young parents. This initiative aims to address this problem at its core by testing a new model for serving the needs of young fathers in family court. The more effective we are at addressing these needs, the more able young fathers will be able to provide meaningful support to their children.

We launched the pilot of this program in Fall 2016 with five young fathers, ranging in age from 18-22. They are all young fathers residing in the Bronx or Brooklyn.

### ***Program Strategies***

TFI uses several strategies to educate the young fathers who are members of our current cohort, and to empower them to serve as advocates for change within the family court system.

1. **Peer Education and Advocacy Training:** The young fathers will participate in a robust 60 plus-hour training made up of a series of structured training modules and discussion groups. The trainings and discussion groups will be sequential, and will focus on both concrete substantive topics (e.g., NYC Family Court structure, child support law, how to access support when navigating the child support system) and advocacy skill development (leadership, peer advocacy, critical thinking, planning, communications, and how to provide actual concrete help to their peers).
2. **Peer Advocacy Activities:** Following their graduation from the training program, the young fathers will spend three months working 8-10-hours/ week as peer advocates in family courts and libraries in all five NYC boroughs. RAP will pair our trained advocates with young fathers who are under the age of 22, have open child support case, and are appearing pro se (without a lawyer) in family court. Peer advocates will receive a small weekly stipend to provide the following types of advocacy support:
  - a. **Serve as Child Support Peer Advocates** through youth-led child-support resource centers in public libraries and family courts. Our trained fathers will provide other young fathers with legal rights information, help understanding legal documents, help completing child support documentation (e.g., the Financial Affidavit), help collecting and organizing documentation to prepare for child support hearings, and referrals to lawyers as necessary. In addition to child-support and Family Court-related issues, these Peer Advocates will also make referrals to community services that are most relevant to young fathers, including to GED and literacy programs, employment training opportunities, and financial literacy support programs.
  - b. **Serve as Child Support Pro Se Guides in Family Court.** As Guides, they will escort young fathers through the child support process, including meeting the young father at Family Court, reviewing and preparing their documents for court, observing child support



- proceedings, and providing one-on-one follow-up support with next steps like necessary filings.
- c. **Conduct legal rights workshops** in community-based organizations, at Riker's Island, homeless shelters, foster care group homes, and non-traditional settings like barber shops. These workshops will use RAP's Teen Father Know-Your-Rights Toolkit (developed and produced with support from the NY Community Trust) as a foundation for providing other young fathers with the legal rights information and advocacy assistance they need to appear in Family Court and make the best case for themselves as possible.
  - d. **Shaping The Child Support System:** Finally, RAP will work directly with the Human Resources Administration and the NYC Family Court system to conduct a robust policy assessment of the impact of the peer-advocacy model on costs to the family court system and the child support system the cost critical metrics including: reduced missed court appearances by young fathers, and on shifts in the nature and level of support provided by magistrates in actual child support proceedings.

## **Youth Organizing Program: YouthVoiceNYC**

YouthVoiceNYC is a youth-led organizing initiative that trains youth to identify and develop citywide campaigns focused on critical social issues affecting low-income youth in NYC like school discipline policies, stop & frisk, and food justice. Through youth organizing, community education and mobilization, and leadership skills, RAP's youth leaders mobilize other teens to get involved in pushing for concrete system-level change.

YouthVoiceNYC mobilizes low-income youth in NYC to become leaders in the fight to end poverty. We provide organizing training and leadership development so that youth impacted by poverty can take real action on issues affecting them and secure a meaningful voice in city- level decision-making.

The Youth Leadership Council, the dedicated group of youth that leads the YouthVoiceNYC campaigns, conducts extensive research to learn about the most pressing issues impacting youth in their communities. They use traditional grassroots outreach and research strategies (e.g., surveys, meetings), and online strategies (e.g., social media & video) to reach youth who are typically more isolated (e.g., teen parents,



homeless youth). They base their campaign issue on what they learn from the community.

Their current campaign launched in the 2015-2016 school year. It focuses on pushing for greater equity in access to college preparatory resources (e.g., academic and financial aid counselors, college prep courses) in the city's poorest high schools. Rather than multiple annual campaigns, as we've done in the past, this new campaign will last four years. This shift will deepen our youths' understanding of their campaign issue, enable them to build stronger relationships within the broader movement, and have a more meaningful impact on the education system. One of the reasons that we shifted the structure of our work was to give our youth more time to understand and become part of the City's larger educational equity movement.

Additionally, all of our YouthVoiceNYC work is done through partnerships and alliances with a network of citywide coalitions, youth service organizations, and youth organizing groups. To this end, we are working closely with a collective of youth education organizing groups called Urban Youth Collaborative. The four included organizations - Make The Road NY, Sistas & Brothas United, Future of Tomorrow, and Youth Ministries For Peace & Justice - help shape education organizing throughout the city. Through coalition work, joint research activities, & collaborative youth organizing training our youth are cultivating strong allies in their effort to build a strong youth voice that can ensure our high schools prepare students to go to college.

More broadly, we continue to educate our youth about the history of various social justice movements, and the power of youth within those movements. Our goal is to enable youth to see themselves as an important part of an ongoing, powerful movement to push for social justice in NYC and in society more generally.

## **Advocacy Initiatives**

Youth living in poverty are becoming a permanent underclass. The most recent Census found more children in poverty now than at any other point since the Census began recording poverty data. Research has found that almost 1 in 3 of these young people are likely to remain poor their entire lives. Evidence of poverty's increasing intractability abounds. For example, last year among teens in the city's lowest-income communities, fewer than one in three high school graduate went to college. At the root of this is the inability of young people in poverty to actually access the resources that will strengthen them to move permanently out of poverty, such as housing, tutors, job training, or health care. Although such resources exist in NYC's communities, even the savviest teens can become overwhelmed and disempowered by shifting agency program rules, complicated eligibility requirements, and front-line workers who regularly misunderstand and misapply their rights. At the same time, young people are systematically ignored as real stakeholders in their own communities, locking them out of efforts to solve the problems that plague them. As a result, *hundreds of thousands* of low-income teens are blocked from - or simply forgo - the anti-poverty supports they need to stay in school, make healthy sexual choices, and obtain economic stability. RAP addresses these problems head on by simultaneously strengthening individual young people to effectively self-advocate within the city's various legal and government systems, and working to make laws and policies more responsive to the needs of low-income youth at a structural level.

RAP's goal is to expand the voice and role of low-income and vulnerable young people in responding to the entrenched social issues impacting their communities. In practice, this means both that we aim to give impacted youth themselves the tools to transform their lives and communities, and that we push to make government and community systems more responsive to the needs and priorities of vulnerable teens. We have identified specific outcomes for the coming year in each area of our core areas of work, and have described them below:

### **A. The Health Justice and Trafficking Initiative**

This initiative grows out of our research findings that, despite all minors having certain basic health rights, young people who engage in transactional sex often face significant unique barriers to health care, resulting in a number of medical concerns that go unaddressed. We also found that the health care system can serve as an

important gateway into a network of broader preventive services for these young people - For example, doctors must provide care that is confidential, making them an excellent initial point of contact for vulnerable teens who may be wary of talking to adults. The goal of the initiative is to help youth, youth workers, lawyers, and health practitioners utilize this gateway to empower youth impacted by trafficking.

In the coming year, we aim to: (1) Build the capacity of youth workers in education, foster care and detention facilities, lawyers and health practitioners to recognize and respond to health needs that increase vulnerability to trafficking, and to use health care as a gateway to broader supports for victims; and (3) Work to build and expand our corps of young people who are trained as peer advocates through our Health & Trafficking initiative.

## **B. Teen Fatherhood Initiative**

The program component of our Teen Fatherhood Initiative launched in Fall 2016 after several years as an advocacy initiative with no programming component. The Teen Fatherhood Initiative combines peer advocacy training, legislative advocacy, community storytelling, and new media strategies to improve economic outcomes for low-income teen dads. Close to 97% of all dads must appear in Family Court without an advocate to help them. This disproportionately harms teen dads. For example, close to 1 in 4 teen dads owes between \$2000 and \$9000 in past due child support, simply because they were not able to advocate for an initial amount that they could afford. Ultimately, the goal is to help close the justice gap in Family Court by equipping young fathers to provide critical - and often elusive - advocacy support around child support to other dads.

Our goal for the coming year is to build on the strong partnerships and research foundation that we have developed around this work. Specifically, we aim to: (1) Train a corps of young fathers to provide mentorship and peer advocacy support to other teen dads in the NYC foster care system, homeless shelters, detention facilities, and Family Courts around child support issues; and (2) Push for citywide adoption of Family Court policies that remove barriers to advocacy support for teen parents, and reduce the deleterious economic outcomes for teen dads representing themselves in Family Court.