



# National Institute of Justice

P r o g r a m F o c u s

## Beacons of Hope:

### *New York City's School-Based Community Centers*



# Beacons of Hope: New York City's School-Based Community Centers

By Daniel McGillis

**V**irtually all American cities have some neighborhoods with chronic, pervasive problems such as substance abuse and other crimes. These usually economically poor communities often have little ready access to employment training or to educational, counseling, recreational, health, and other services. Furthermore, these areas often lack effective community organizations, which makes it difficult to mount campaigns against violence, drugs, and related problems.

## Highlights

Most cities have areas that are beset by crime and its related problems. Services such as health care, employment training, educational assistance, and counseling centers are often of poor quality or nonexistent. Seeking ways to control crime, the criminal justice system is increasing its cooperation with other urban agencies to address these multiple issues.

In 1991 a New York City Mayoral Commission implemented the Beacon Community Center Program, which called for residents' input into the centers' development and management so that activities and services could meet each community's particular needs. A basic principle is that neighborhoods should address overlapping needs of residents with an extensive, but integrated, variety of services rather than try piecemeal approaches to social problems.

A primary mission of the 37 Beacons now in New York is to give residents, particularly youths, tools to help them avoid crime and

violence and to solve community problems. Among the array of services and programs provided are mentoring, tutoring, employment training and counseling, and cultural and recreational activities. Many of these services are aimed at addressing the risk factors associated with crime and violence by strengthening protective factors (such as bonding with role models and developing healthy peer groups). Targeted efforts include anti-violence programs and campaigns, conflict resolution training, public education about drugs, substance abuse treatment, community beautification projects, and athletic activities involving youths and local police officers.

Characteristics of Beacons that make them particularly promising strategies include local control by residents, a comprehensive program for all ages, an emphasis on personal responsibility, and a safe, secure environment where problems can be discussed and solved.

Instead, citizens tend to isolate themselves behind locked doors—an understandable response to their fears but one that can often immobilize a community and perpetuate its high level of disorder and hopelessness.

Newspapers throughout the Nation daily chronicle the challenges young people face in communities often characterized by drive-by shootings, crack houses, high unemployment, and other hostile features. Young people who struggle to pull together the raw materials for a workable childhood—parental love and attention, productive friendships, a meaningful education—often find they come up short in some, if not all, of these areas. Often these young people's problems lead to their involvement with the criminal justice system.

Seeking ways to control crime has also led to the criminal justice system's increasing cooperation with other professions, such as health and education. Many community policing programs focus on working with allied professionals and citizens on crime prevention through various efforts to help build productive communities.

In this context, the Beacon Community Center Program ("the Beacons") offers an integrated strategy to help youths and their families. Developed in New York City in 1991, the Beacons program converts local school

# PROGRAM FOCUS

buildings into active community centers for use after school, on weekends, and during the summer. This Program Focus discusses the New York Beacons' strategy and activities, history, and general operations. It then focuses on the activities of one particular program, Red Hook in Brooklyn, before analyzing the Beacons' potential for preventing crime in New York and other urban centers.

## The Beacons' Strategy

A core concept of the Beacons is that efforts to prevent violence, drug abuse, and other social problems must simultaneously address a wide range of critical needs of at-risk groups rather than provide isolated interventions.<sup>1</sup> Single interventions may have merit, but their impact is likely to be diluted by the range of negative forces

confronting those in need.<sup>2</sup> Backers of this approach commonly refer to the necessity for a "full-court press" to address problems of distressed communities.

The numerous services provided by the Beacons include education, employment training and counseling, and cultural and recreational activities. These address important risk and protective factors (see exhibit 1) associated with crime and violence prevention.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the Beacons provide vehicles to directly address these issues, including campaigns against violence, conflict resolution training, public education about drugs, substance abuse treatment, and joint athletic activities involving youths and local police officers.

Some of the keys to successful development for young people, according to research literature, are:

- Availability of opportunities for caring relationships with peers and adults.
- The existence of high expectations and clear standards of behavior.
- Availability of opportunities to engage in productive educational and cultural activities and to make a contribution to the community.
- Continuity of supports and role models.<sup>4</sup>

These characteristics define the conditions that many observers feel are essential for the existence of a "healthy" community. Thus the Beacon Community Centers also focus on bringing youths and adults together in activities that have these features.

**Activities addressing crime and violence.** Services and activities to meet

### Exhibit 1. Risk and Protective Factors

The risk and protective factors are often grouped into five categories:

Category	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Individual	alienation, lack of bonding to society	resilient temperament, positive attitudes
Family	child abuse, family conflict, parental rejection	bonding with prosocial family members, provision of clear standards for behavior by the family
School	early academic failure, lack of commitment to school	bonding with teachers, commitment to school
Peer Group	friends involved in crime and violence	healthy friendships with prosocial peers
Community	poverty, high rates of drug abuse and crime	clear standards for behavior and recognition of positive behavior

## PROGRAM FOCUS



Photo by Laura Dwight

Mentoring plays an important role in the Beacons program.

community improvement goals aim to significantly reduce risk factors associated with crime and violence and strengthen protective factors. Many of the programs increase community ties between young people and adults who serve as role models. The importance of this factor was highlighted by Chicago Mayor Richard Daley when he announced the development of community centers in that city modeled after New York's Beacons. Daley stated, "Young people get sucked into lives of gangs, drugs, and crime because they're searching for something that's missing from their lives. It might be a loving and supportive family, a tutor, a mentor, or a summer job."<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the educational, employment, counseling, and other services that can influence the choices of young people and adults to avoid the pitfalls of inner-city life, a number of Beacons have programs that expressly address problems of crime and violence.

**Anti-violence programs and campaigns.** Some Beacons have held "stop the violence" marches and vigils to increase awareness of the problem and to demonstrate community resolve to combat violence. Others provide counseling to encourage members to refrain from participating in violent or criminal acts.

The Mothers Against Violence group at the Washington Heights Beacon has recruited a group of 15 youths off the streets who were involved in crime. These youths meet two times per week and discuss how to get an education, find jobs, and dissociate themselves from those involved in criminal activity. Beacon personnel have worked with the youths on their educational and employment goals.

The Countee Cullen Beacon in Central Harlem has conducted a number of creative outreach programs to increase understanding about the problems associated with violence. Youths at the Beacon collaborated on the

production of a videotape about victims of violence that was narrated by Walter Cronkite and broadcast as one segment of a four-part television series on victims of crime.

In addition, Countee Cullen sponsors a Men's Unity Day one Saturday a year. Approximately 300 men participate in workshops on a variety of topics, including how to control violence. According to a program official, men participating in the program are encouraged to "drop their masks and share experiences" regarding anger, violence, and other problems.

The Fund for the City of New York's Youth Development Institute reported that several Beacons have sponsored "If we can play together, we can live together" sports events in which hundreds of youths participated and pledged to end the violence.<sup>6</sup>

**Conflict resolution/mediation.** Numerous Beacons sponsor conflict resolution skills training and mediation programs to resolve disputes. The Washington Heights Beacon, sponsored by Alianza Dominicana, a local nonprofit community service organization, conducts outreach measures to prevent gang and other violence in the community. Beacon staff members and participants often become aware of disputes between groups and intervene to halt the escalation of violence.

The Countee Cullen Beacon has developed an ambitious conflict resolution effort called the Peacemakers Program. It has received funding from a number of sources, including AmeriCorps Summer of Safety, the

Mott Foundation, and the New York City Department of Youth Services. As part of the program, 40 youths went to Bowdoin College in Maine for conflict resolution training. They, in turn, provided training to others at the community center. The youths have also held an anti-violence rally and produced a videotape describing the work of the Peacemakers Program.

**Anti-drug efforts.** Numerous Beacons have implemented anti-drug efforts aimed at reducing drug and alcohol abuse and identifying and responding to service gaps in the community. Part of the success of drug-prevention efforts has come from obtaining the participation of community members. Activities have included efforts to increase drug and alcohol treatment services, alternative activities for youths and families, and drug and alcohol public education campaigns. The Countee Cullen Beacon has an extensive Narcotics Awareness program.

**Interaction with police.** A number of Beacons provide facilities for Police Athletic Leagues where youths and police officers interact in informal settings and build trust. The North Shore, Staten Island, Beacon has sponsored basketball games with the local housing police to reduce tensions with youths.

Some Beacons have worked closely with the local police in an effort to establish safe corridors for people traveling to a Beacon. One Beacon held a Police Precinct Youth Speakout to encourage communication between local youths and police officers.

## The Initial Concept and Implementation

A New York Mayoral Commission, chaired by former U.S. Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, created the initial Beacons concept to develop community centers in selected New York schools. The commission's aim was to provide the city's young people with constructive alternatives to life on the streets, to help reduce drug use, and to provide a means for problem solving in disadvantaged communities.

The founders of the Beacons felt that such programs could provide a way to draw upon and focus the strengths of families and communities to address local needs. The architects of the concept stressed that the range of services provided must be tailored to meet the particular needs of each community and must be designed and controlled by local residents. As a result, Michele Cahill, the director of the Youth Development Institute, said the Beacons' effort is not a traditional "project" with specified components; it is a "strategy" designed to help troubled communities meet their specific needs. Beacons are intended to engage the energy, commitment, and sense of personal responsibility of community residents.

New York City's Department of Youth Services, under the leadership of then-Commissioner Richard Murphy, funded the first 10 Beacons in 1991. A citywide competition for funding support resulted in each

Beacon's receiving \$450,000 for operational expenses.<sup>7</sup>

Assistance in designing the effort was provided by the Fund for the City of New York's Youth Development Institute. Michele Cahill noted that part of the genius of Commissioner Murphy's program development effort was simply convincing the city's policymakers that establishing community centers in local schools was a "normal" way of helping communities and delivering services.

Applicants were required to describe the range of services their Beacons would provide and to demonstrate that they had the support of the local community. They were required to develop a community advisory council comprising teachers, students, and others who had an interest in the community. Proposals were reviewed by the Interagency Coordinating Council on Youth, which included representatives from most of the city's agencies that served young people. The communities selected had particularly high levels of poverty, substance abuse, and juvenile crime.

In the first round of funding, the community-based organizations were not required to develop significant support from the local school prior to applying, but this approach was changed in subsequent rounds of applications as the number of Beacons expanded to 37. The schools and local school boards in later rounds were provided the opportunity to help define the needs the Beacons were supposed to meet.

The Beacons were funded in three rounds. After the first 10 Beacons began operation in 1991, 10 more received funding in 1992, and the remaining 17 were funded in 1993. The city of New York has 32 school districts—each now has a Beacon; 5 of the districts contain 2.

## Funding and Operating the Beacons

**Operating a New York Beacon.** To operate a Beacon Community Center, major issues to be addressed include:

- Obtaining the funding required for operation.
- Selecting appropriate community-based organizations to sponsor the program.
- Dealing with the many complexities involved in program startup, including community advisory council and staff selection, winning the trust and support of the community, and related issues.
- Developing effective working relationships with officials and teachers in the school where the Beacon is located.
- Providing adequate security for program participants.
- Monitoring and evaluating program achievements and problems.

**Funding.** Each community-based organization administering a Beacon in New York City receives \$450,000

per year from the city's Department of Youth Services (DYS). In addition, the city Board of Education receives \$50,000 per Beacon from the Department of Youth Services for costs associated with the use of school space, such as custodial services.

DYS did not increase its staff to monitor, assist, and assess the \$18 million-plus program. The Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York has performed the program documentation and assistance role that might otherwise have been required of DYS. The Institute receives its support from foundations.<sup>8</sup> The Department of Youth Services receives monitoring data directly from the Beacons; this information is sent to the Youth Development Institute to provide a basis for its documentation reports.

The colocation of services from governmental agencies, the development of grant-supported programs, and the use of volunteer assistance can expand the range of services provided by Beacons far beyond those supported by the Beacons' core grant. Other agencies that have supported program services in Beacon Community Centers include the City Board of Education, the City Department of Health, the Community Development Agency, and the New York State Departments of Social Services, Health, and Substance Abuse Services. Memorandums of Understanding have been developed to formalize the arrangements between Beacons and relevant agencies colocating services. The voluntary delivery of services (e.g., health services by the Lutheran Medical

Center to the Red Hook Beacon) is also important, as are the contributions of scores of individual volunteers. In addition, donations from private industry can be helpful. For example, J.P. Morgan and Company contributed funds to renovate the playgrounds of Beacons across the city.

In an era of sharp budgetary limits, it may be necessary in some communities that wish to develop and operate Beacons to implement them with relatively low budgets. Chicago's development of a network of community centers modeled after the Beacons will rely heavily on partnerships among existing resources in the community, and funds will be spent primarily for personnel to develop and maintain these partnerships (see "Chicago YouthNet Project").

**Starting up.** To implement a New York Beacon, a community advisory council composed of a cross-section of youths and adults, school officials, business and religious leaders, and others involved in the community is established at the outset to assist in the design and implementation of the program. Some councils include local community police officers; local city council representatives are *ex officio* members of all such councils. Local community meetings and focus group sessions are used to help clarify what services and activities are most needed and to develop strategies to ensure that residents will participate in the program. Community advisory council members can play a critical role in outreach to the community, resolve turf issues, and perform other functions.

## Chicago YouthNet Project

Chicago is creating a series of community centers modeled on the Beacons but with some modifications. The community centers are being developed in response to a recommendation by Chicago's Youth Development Task Force, which was commissioned by the mayor and chaired by the president of the locally based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Task force members included local governmental officials, representatives of nonprofit organizations, community members, and academics. The MacArthur Foundation served as the task force's secretariat. The task force conducted investigations for 1 year and held intensive community meetings organized by youths in four neighborhoods. The resulting plan released in mid-1994 provided a detailed blueprint to address the problem of reducing risk factors confronting local youths. In December 1994 Chicago Mayor Richard Daley announced plans to develop the initial 6 centers. The city plans eventually to open similar centers in all 25 Chicago police districts.

These Chicago YouthNet Centers, as they are called, will provide a similar array of services to those provided by the New York Beacons, but they will differ from the Beacons in significant respects. Centers will be located not only in school buildings but also in other community facilities, such as recreation centers (e.g., YMCA's). Second, limited funding is being provided for the effort that will work to develop partnerships across existing resources in the selected neighborhoods. Third, some of the YouthNet Centers will have smaller affiliated satellite facilities in the neighborhood to coordinate service delivery with the center. The program in Chicago's West Town community will use 10 different neighborhood facilities to deliver services. Satellite facilities used by some of the YouthNet programs include churches, town halls, local health centers, settlement houses, and child care centers.

The Fund for the City of New York's Youth Development Institute's technical assistance to the Beacons program includes:

- Working with individual Beacons in the design and implementation of their programs.
- Conducting monthly meetings with all the Beacons' directors so they can share common concerns and their potential solutions.
- Providing advice to other communities that are considering development of Beacons programs.

Linda Pitts, a former senior official with the Department of Youth Services, noted that perhaps the most important contribution of the Youth Development Institute to the Beacons' effort has been instilling all of the programs with a common ambitious

vision—to provide a setting for the positive development of community members and, ultimately, community revitalization. This concept has ensured a consistency in philosophy and broad goals in Beacons throughout the city. The monthly directors' meetings have helped to reinforce this philosophy and have fostered shared problem solving to realize the Beacons' aims.

**Staff selection.** At a minimum, selection of Beacons staff involves identifying individuals who have a strong commitment to the Beacons' mission, personal leadership skills to help develop the program in the community, flexibility to deal with the inevitable changes that will be necessary as the program evolves, and the ability to work as a team member. Staff should also have demographic characteristics that are representative of the local community's population

and, if possible, should live in the neighborhood. All Beacons have full-time directors; some have co-directors as well. Depending upon the range of services and activities provided, according to research by the Youth Development Institute, "Beacons may have as many as 30 full-time and 40 part-time staff"<sup>9</sup> to cover their many hours of programming. Such staff members include local youths and community members, college students, and individuals with social work or other professional training.

For specialized services that cannot be provided by Beacons staff members (e.g., computer training, instruction in the arts, and family counseling), the Beacons identify appropriate organizations and arrange for subcontracts with them.

Even with effective selection and performance of the community advisory council, staff, and supporting organizations, the initial period of operation can be challenging. Officials and staff must earn the residents' trust and must work to instill a sense of ownership of the Beacons by the program's participants.

### **School/community relationships.**

Personnel need to maintain close and friendly working relationships with officials and teachers in the schools where they are located.

One major issue that has recurred in a number of Beacons has been referred to by Michele Cahill of the Youth Development Institute as "the chalk and eraser wars." Teachers returning in the morning understandably expect to find their classrooms in the same

## PROGRAM FOCUS



Photo by Laura Dwight

Children develop skills for the future.

condition they left them the day before. When chalk and erasers disappear and are replaced with pizza boxes and other items, teachers are understandably upset. Beacons have had to find ways to ensure that program participants respect the need to maintain classrooms in the condition they were found. A number of Beacons have monitors check all the rooms at the end of each evening to confirm that everything is in order. One program has purchased a supply of chalk and erasers for the school to ensure that these critical supplies are available for teachers.

An additional issue confronted by the Beacons is whether to hire teachers from the local schools. Teachers in

New York often are eager to supplement their incomes, at a customary rate of \$28 per hour, by providing afterschool services. The community-based organizations, however, typically pay their personnel a far lower hourly rate—approximately \$17 to \$18 per hour—which makes the hiring of teachers difficult because of the Beacons' limited budgets. Then, too, demographic characteristics of teachers are often not representative of the local community; for example, African Americans and Hispanics are disproportionately underrepresented. Since Beacons attempt to have their staffs mirror the ethnic composition of the

local community, they have often hired local community members to serve on their staff.

**Safety and security.** Given their long hours of operation and the large numbers of clients participating in programs, all Beacon Community Centers need to provide security. Beacons use a variety of successful approaches; no major incidents have occurred during their 4 years of operation. The four primary approaches are:

■ **Professional security personnel.** Several Beacons employ outside, professional security agencies. The Fruit of Islam security service, for example, is used by the community center in Central Harlem.

■ **Local youths.** Some programs, such as the Washington Heights Community Center, hire young people as monitors and provide them with walkie-talkies. The monitors also conduct peer rap sessions to find ways to enhance security in the centers.

■ **Local adults.** Some Beacons have adults, including parents of program participants, monitor community centers. In addition to using adults as security personnel, the mere presence of parents and other adults at events is reported to be valuable in maintaining responsible behavior by youths.

■ **School security personnel.** Numerous Beacons provide funding for school security personnel to work after school hours. In some Beacons, the school security personnel provide protection from 3 to 5 p.m., and other arrangements are made for evening security.

A number of strategies are used to increase the safety of program participants when traveling to and from the facilities. Some Beacons have instituted buddy systems to encourage youths to walk home in pairs. In other centers, groups of youths are escorted home by older tutors. A number of community centers have Department of Youth Services vans to transport program participants home in the evenings. Some Beacons have achieved significant cooperation from the police in developing safe passages to and from the centers. Adequate security arrangements can persuade youths to participate in Beacons' programs who otherwise might go home directly after school and lock themselves in their apartments.

**Monitoring and evaluation.** The Fund for the City of New York, through the Youth Development Institute, has been collecting information from the Beacons on a monthly basis, including data on the number of days of operation per month, the total number of individuals participating in programs during the month, the number of hours of programming provided, and the age distribution and race/ethnicity of new participants. Beacons submit weekly activity charts that include specific programs, sponsoring groups, days and hours of operation, target populations, and the numbers of males and females served by each activity. For example, a section of the Youth Development Institute report states:

Beacons typically enroll approximately 1,000 community residents as ongoing participants. The highest annual enrollment is 1,848. The lowest for a fully implemented Beacon is 628. Average daily attendance at the 20 fully implemented Beacons [as of the time of the report] is 203. All Beacons have afterschool programs. These programs have average daily attendances of 120 to 150 elementary and/or intermediate school students. All offer youths educational enrichment and homework help, recreation, and cultural arts activities. Twenty-one Beacons have youth leadership programs that enroll from 50 to 200 teenagers. Twenty-seven Beacons offer adult education programs, including GED preparation, English as a second language,

and/or adult basic education/literacy....Other adult programs include computer literacy, conversational English, Spanish as a second language, and entrepreneurship courses. Five Beacons have A.A., Al Anon/Alateen groups meeting at least weekly, and two host Narcotics Anonymous meetings.<sup>10</sup>

The individual Beacons also fill out monthly forms outlining accomplishments, issues, and concerns. Such forms can be helpful in discussions between Beacons' directors. All youths participating in Beacons' activities complete a "Youth Participant Enrollment Form," which includes demographic information, activities in which they are registering, and services they are requesting. The form includes a section for a 3-month followup to indicate if they did, in fact, take part in the activities they chose and receive the services they sought.

While this monitoring information provides the basis for developing a description of Beacons' services and the number of clients served, it would be valuable to conduct an evaluation of the impact of the Beacons on those who participate in the programs. Some of the major outcome measures under consideration by the Department of Youth Services for such an impact evaluation include:

- Improved school attendance.
- Improved relationships between youths and adults in the community.

- Improved cognitive skills of program participants.

- Increased community service roles.

- Reduced drug activity and congregation on street corners in the Beacons' vicinities.

## Red Hook: One Beacon In Action

The Red Hook section of Brooklyn has often been characterized as a neighborhood where poverty, crime, drugs, a lack of services, and a lack of hope prevail. Red Hook is an isolated 680-acre peninsula that extends from the western portion of Brooklyn. The community's physical isolation is underscored by the fact that only one road connects the peninsula to Brooklyn proper.

The community's social isolation is also striking. Because of its many problems, Beacon administrators noted that it can be stigmatizing for children to say they come from Red Hook. The director said the children learn at an early age to feel bad about the neighborhood. Program personnel noted that, "Red Hook lacks stores, movie theaters, meeting places, and other facilities that contribute to a sense of community."<sup>11</sup>

The youths of Red Hook are primarily African American (51 percent) and Hispanic (44 percent). Sixty-nine percent of the area's out-of-school youths between the ages of 16 and 19 are unemployed. Only 22 percent of the children live in two-parent families.<sup>12</sup>

## PROGRAM FOCUS

The median income for Red Hook public housing households—which comprise 75 percent of the entire population—is \$7,602. In comparison, the median income citywide is over \$34,000. The community center reported that “over half of the households in Red Hook report no wage or salaried income compared with 26 percent citywide.”<sup>13</sup> Unemployment is extremely high, and many youths alternatively find “employment” in various facets of the drug trade.

The Red Hook Community Center was one of the first 10 Beacons funded by the Department of Youth Services. It is located in P.S. 15—the Patrick F. Daly Elementary School—and began operations in the fall of 1991. The school is named in honor of a principal who, in December 1992, was shot and killed in midday when he got caught in the crossfire of drug dealers.

Good Shepherd Services, a community-based organization, operates the Red Hook Community Center. This organization was founded in the late 1940’s to provide residential programs for troubled teenagers, and over the years it has sponsored a wide array of services, including counseling efforts, youth and adult education programs, career readiness training, and drug-prevention programs.

Good Shepherd Services began its work in Red Hook in the early 1980’s when it developed programs for school dropouts and pregnant teenagers. Good Shepherd personnel recognized that Red Hook lacked many essential services, and they saw the request for proposals for the Beacons program as an opportunity to meet these needs through the development of a school-based community center.

**Red Hook philosophy.** A community advisory council composed of parents, youths, and school officials was established during the application process to formulate the philosophy, rules, and program of activities for the Red Hook Beacon (see “Basic Membership Rules”). At the core of the Red Hook Beacon’s philosophy is the commitment to “maximize opportunities for youths and adults to develop strong, caring relationships through structured activities which would enhance skills and provide opportunities for adults and youths to participate in the community in meaningful ways.”<sup>14</sup>

Good Shepherd officials stressed that the first year of operation was difficult. It took time to gain the trust of the residents and instill the belief that the community center belonged to its members. The program also had to establish workable norms with local youths.

One strategy the Red Hook Community Center used during the first 6 months of operation to demonstrate that this was a new place with a new set of rules and norms was to teach and sponsor only unconventional sports, such as ultimate frisbee. Traditional sports, such as basketball, were not available during this initial period. And by teaching new sports, personnel were able to provide participants with new ways to relate to one another. The officials reported that during the same period, other Beacons that sponsored basketball leagues experienced sharp disputes among players akin to those occurring on playgrounds.

The program’s philosophy is manifested in the community center’s

### Basic Membership Rules

The community advisory council and staff of the Red Hook Community Center have developed six basic rules:

1. Persons participating in the center’s activities must register as a member of the Beacon.
2. Members must carry their identification cards and show them at the door every time they come to the center.
3. To ensure the safety and enjoyment of members, the center does not allow alcohol, drugs, weapons, beepers, radios, or smoking in the building.
4. Eating and drinking are only allowed in specified areas of the center.
5. Members must sign into a specific program activity when they arrive at the center. Members are not allowed to hang out in the halls or walk around the building.
6. Members are expected to be respectful of others, their property, and the building.

## PROGRAM FOCUS

family-like atmosphere. People arriving at the center are warmly greeted and asked to sign in. There are no metal detectors; visitors are not frisked or treated like criminals. Instead, they are expected to respect one another and the role of the Beacon in the community.

The Red Hook Community Center's efforts have been successful in creating a positive environment. Since conflict is immediately addressed and mediated, there has been no violence at the center in its 3-1/2 years of operation. Because of this positive atmosphere, participants have increasingly brought problems such as interpersonal conflicts to program staff, and the staff has been able to intervene in numerous disputes before they escalated to the streets.

### Individual Growth

The Red Hook Community Center provides a variety of activities and services to participants of all ages 6 days a week throughout the year.

■ **The Afterschool Center.** The most discussed topic in the initial planning stages was development of quality afterschool programs. Meetings were held with numerous community members, both youths and adults, to design programs and related activities. In the Afterschool Center program, students from the first to the sixth grades receive homework assistance and tutoring, and there are a number of educational, arts, sports, and community service activities Tuesdays through Thursdays. Innovative classes such as playwriting are offered.

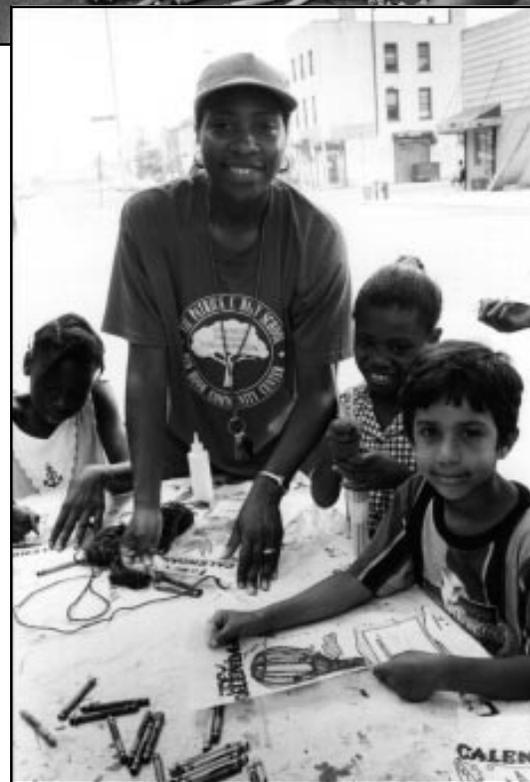


Between learning life skills and how to avoid the pitfalls of the inner city, residents enjoy recreational activities.

■ **Computer center.** The community center has 11 IBM computers. Members can take classes to learn how to type and format text and how to create graphics.

■ **Cultural activities.** Cultural activities include a movie club, art projects, dance, music, and a guest speakers' program. The center's Newspaper Club produces the *Red Hook Youth Chronicle*, a paper written and produced by teenagers using desktop publishing.

■ **Employment training.** The Red Hook Youth Leadership Apprentice Program (RHYLAP), funded by the City Department of Employment, provides a variety of services for 100 teenagers, including career readiness seminars, counseling, and job placement at private and



nonprofit organizations. The RHYLAP participants, who range from 14 to 21 years old, spend 10 hours per week on project activities and discuss their job-placement experiences at weekly group seminars.

Photos by Laura Dwight

## PROGRAM FOCUS



Photo by Laura Dwight

A bird in hand: making the neighborhood a more attractive place.

■ **Recreational activities.** The community center sponsors a variety of recreational programs, now including basketball and volleyball leagues, ultimate frisbee games, and martial arts. Special services are provided to support the athletic program. For example, on Wednesday evenings, child care services are available for women involved in the volleyball league.

### Family Focus

■ **Family counseling.** The Child Welfare Administration funds counselors to assist families with a wide range of concerns, including family conflicts and behavioral problems. Individual, group, and family counseling are available for children and families along with related services, such as referrals to other city and State social service agencies.

■ **Health services.** On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, the Lutheran Medical Center staffs a health clinic for youths at the Red Hook

Community Center. Nurse practitioners from the medical center diagnose illnesses, provide treatment, and make referrals to medical specialists when necessary.

■ **Family Night.** Every Friday evening is Family Night so parents and children can get together to enjoy recreational activities, games, and related entertainment. Parents plan the events at weekly meetings.

### Community Involvement

■ **Challengers Program.** The Challengers Program involves 20 young people ages 9 to 12 in community service projects and problem solving. This weekly program is taught by an activity specialist and a social worker who instruct youths about positive ways to respond to the many challenges associated with growing up. The students also meet with adults who serve as role models and work

on community service projects such as neighborhood beautification.

■ **Pathfinders Program.** A group of older students, ranging in age from 13 to 17 and led by two activity specialists, engages in group building and community service activities. Participants in the Pathfinders find ways to alleviate community problems and help plan such events as the Red Hook Community Center's annual Thanksgiving dinner. Group leaders are available to provide guidance and support to Pathfinder members, some of whom were previously considered to be school troublemakers, when they confront crises.

■ **Youth on the Move Project.** Teenagers involved in the Youth on the Move Project learn to be community developers. They conduct focus groups on key issues (e.g., guns, drugs, and crime) and then develop strategies to address them (e.g., drug-prevention campaigns). This effort is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

■ **Community improvement projects.** Volunteers are involved in numerous community improvement and service projects. Over 200 members, for example, planted a garden and built safe play areas.

■ **Drug-prevention program.** Community center members are active in the South Brooklyn Neighborhood Area Partnership for a Drug Free Community (SNAP), which is funded by the Department of Health and Human Services' Center for Substance

Abuse Prevention. The goals of SNAP include reducing drug and alcohol abuse, achieving broad community involvement in prevention efforts, coordinating across existing prevention efforts, and identifying and responding to service gaps in the community. Activities include drug and alcohol public education campaigns, efforts to increase drug and alcohol treatment services, and alternative activities for young people and their families.

SNAP holds meetings at the Red Hook Community Center. In addition to community residents, participants include health care providers, law enforcement personnel, and business leaders. Community center programs such as Youth on the Move work with SNAP.

## Beacons' Potential For Preventing Crime

Recent public opinion polls have repeatedly shown that crime is considered to be one of the most troubling problems in the United States.<sup>15</sup> U.S. homicide rates, for example, are typically triple or quadruple those of other industrialized democracies.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, no one policy measure will reduce crime and violence in America. Most experts say that a concerted and balanced effort is needed and that vigorous steps are essential to achieve the apprehension, prosecution, and conviction of offenders and to prevent the occurrence of crime and violence in the first place.<sup>17</sup>

## Red Hook's Impact

A formal impact evaluation of the work of the Red Hook Community Center has not been conducted. The data currently being collected by the Department of Youth Services document the processes of the program (e.g., numbers and types of clients and types of services provided) but not the impact of the Beacon. Although an empirical study of the program's impact would be valuable, some indicators of the Red Hook Beacon's effect on participants' lives are available. In the December 1994 issue of the *Red Hook Youth Chronicle*, two participants reflected upon the role of the community center in their lives.

One 13-year-old who had lived her entire life in Red Hook stated:

While growing up, I have seen many acts of violence....Late at night, we would hear gunshots and wonder whose life had been taken away. Many times, I didn't want to go outside because I was afraid I would get hurt. In November of 1991, my life changed. I became a member of the Red Hook Community Center. As a member, I was safe from the random violence that had taken the lives of so many people. I learned that I am an important part of my community, and every positive thing I did reflected on my community....In my opinion, my neighborhood has changed for the better. There are not as many teenagers hanging out on the corners because most of them are at the center....In the future, I hope to give back to my community by becoming a counselor at the center.

Another teenager expressed similar sentiments:

In our leadership class at the center, we spoke about the youth programs that closed due to budget cuts. The community center and the Police Athletic League are like drops of sunshine in my life. My father's not rich and can't afford to send me to "country clubs" or camps. This is it! Please don't take them away.

The Beacon Community Center Program provides a promising vehicle for crime prevention (see "Red Hook's Impact"). The centers strive to address the many risk factors associated with crime and violence and to enhance related protective factors. Research on crime and violence has identified a variety of risk factors that are associated with an increased likelihood of criminal conduct by an individual. Studies have also identified a number of protective factors that, when present, provide individuals with resiliency to keep away from crime and violence.<sup>18</sup>

The services and activities of the Beacons have the potential to strengthen protective factors (e.g., encouraging bonding with role models, developing healthy peer groups, and internalizing

of clear standards for behavior) and reduce risk factors (e.g., through reduction of alienation, educational assistance to improve school achievement, and improvement of community norms). In combination, these services and activities may lead individuals to avoid crime and violence who might otherwise be enticed to commit illegal acts.

Since the programs do much of their work with young children, the actual impact on crime may not emerge for years. The Beacons' efforts to improve parenting may help to break cycles of violence in which abused children later become violent offenders,<sup>19</sup> but here, too, the passage of time is also required to observe such effects. Some other program efforts directly targeted on crime (e.g., anti-violence

## PROGRAM FOCUS

campaigns and drug-prevention programs) may have a more immediate impact. This view led the United States Congress to fund community school efforts as part of the 1994 Crime Bill, and the Department of Health and Human Services provided grants to 48 community school programs during the summer of 1995.

A number of features of Beacon Community Centers make them particularly promising:

■ **Local control.** Beacons are operated in neighborhoods by community-based organizations and are guided by the advice of local citizens. The centers can shape their programs to the specific needs of each area and can provide a forum for problem solving by residents. They can increase pride in the community and the realization by local citizens that improvements are possible.

■ **Comprehensive approach.** Beacons provide a multitude of services and activities that can foster high, and sometimes unprecedented, levels of interagency cooperation. The Beacons' many intervention approaches have the potential to improve individual attitudes and community norms.

■ **Emphasis on personal responsibility.** The Beacons provide citizens with opportunities to seize greater control of their lives through education, employment training, cultural activities, and community service. Instead of just giving community residents a handout, the Beacons provide participants with the means to better manage important facets of their lives.

■ **Role as a beachhead.** Beacons serve as a beachhead in the community for service delivery, problem solving, and, more importantly, hope. They have a high "tangibility quotient" since they are much more than a concept discussed by planners and policymakers. Housed in local school buildings, their lights are on throughout the year, including nights and weekends. These lights in troubled communities attract the energy of local citizens and other organizations and expand outward from their base.

■ **Capacity to address both short- and long-term responses to crime.** Beacons provide a vehicle for rapid responses to local crises (e.g., intervening in simmering gang conflicts and conducting anti-violence vigils) and can also address underlying long-term risk factors through education, employment training, and other efforts.

### Challenges To Expanding Beacons

Despite the many promising features of Beacons, they are not easy to implement or to maintain over time. Major challenges include:

■ **Program development.** Since Beacons are ambitious efforts, they need diligent leaders to address the many problems that inevitably arise. Community advisory councils and staff members need to be selected carefully to ensure that they can earn the trust and respect of local adults and youths. The relationship between the Beacons and local schools needs to be nurtured to avoid the so-called "chalk

and eraser wars." Rules for Beacon participants need to be crafted carefully to avoid problems, and security arrangements need to be well thought out and implemented.

■ **Administering the programs.** Nonprofit organizations that have operated New York Beacons include local service organizations, community development corporations, and community advocacy groups. Linda Pitts, a former official with the Department of Youth Services involved in the design and operation of the program, noted that it is important to select organizations that have track records in delivering services and conducting a range of community activities. She said that organizations involved primarily in the conduct of training and workshops but with no experience in conducting the range of activities associated with Beacons have experienced difficulties in program operation. In cities that do not have an organization like the Youth Development Institute to provide technical assistance and program documentation, consideration needs to be given on how to obtain such services.

■ **Obtaining and maintaining adequate funding.** In an era of sharp budgetary cutbacks at all levels of government, the task of obtaining initial funding for Beacons and maintaining it could be difficult. The case needs to be made that such programs, when properly implemented, provide valuable services to members of the community and also have the potential to address the severe, high-priority problems of crime, violence, and drugs.

Measuring the impact that programs like the Beacons have on crime is always a challenging task. The presence of other events in a given geographical area (e.g., implementation of community policing and changes in school programs), as well as changes in the overall economy and other societal factors, make it difficult to disentangle the specific reasons for changes in crime levels. Research can focus upon drug activity and related problems in the immediate vicinity of the Beacons and perhaps demonstrate a reduction in problems over time that is attributable to the work of the program.

Beacon Community Centers have the potential to provide hope in communities that traditionally lack any sense of control or optimism for the future. The mayor and other policymakers in New York City have shown considerable vision and courage in their vigorous ongoing support of these programs. Leaders in other communities should give careful consideration to whether comparable programs can provide important avenues for residents to escape the current problems confronted by many inner-city communities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Partnerships Against Violence: Promising Programs Resource Guide*, Volume 1, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1994. This reference includes a catalog of over 600 anti-violence programs. Call the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 800-851-3420, to obtain information on purchasing this document or accessing the data on the Internet. Wilson-Brewer, Renee, Stu Cohen, Lydia O'Donnell, and Irene Goodman, *Violence Prevention for Young Adolescents: A Survey of the State of the Art*,

## Sources On Other School-Based Reforms

The recently released book *Full-Service Schools*, by Joy Dryfoos, presents a wealth of information on programs across the Nation that provide health and social services as well as recreational opportunities in local schools. These full-service school programs typically provide services during and after school and focus solely upon the students in each school. They do not serve as community centers like the Beacons.

Dryfoos provides informative profiles of efforts in 12 States—Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, and Oregon—to illustrate that there is a need for school-based services.

The Children's Aid Society of New York sponsors an impressive and well-funded

program in Washington Heights that is independent of the Beacons program. The Society's reports—"Building a Community School: A Revolutionary Design in Public Education" and "A Unique Partnership: The Story of a Community School"—discuss the design and implementation of the program at length. Joy Dryfoos identifies the New York Children's Aid Society program, along with one in Modesto, California, as perhaps the two most comprehensive full-service schools in the Nation. These programs not only provide a range of afterschool activities but also have such features as dramatically reformed school curriculums, onsite health and dental clinics, new buildings specifically designed to deliver the services, and related special characteristics.

Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Reiss, Albert, and Jeffrey Roth (eds.), *Understanding and Preventing Violence*, Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Buka, Stephen, and Felton Earls, "Early Determinants of Delinquency and Violence," *Health Affairs* (Winter 1993); and Developmental Research and Programs, Inc., *Communities that Care: Risk-Focused Prevention Using the Social Development Strategy*, Seattle, WA: Developmental Research and Programs, Inc., 1993.

<sup>4</sup> The report entitled "A Documentation Report on the New York City Beacons Initiative" by Michele Cahill, Jacqueline Perry, Marlene Wright, and Arva Rice of the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York, provides an interesting discussion of factors associated with healthy development and their relevance to the Beacons. Copies of the report are available from the Youth Development Institute, Fund for the City of New York, 121 Sixth Avenue, New York, New York 10013. This report is referred to as "Documentation Report" in subsequent notes.

<sup>5</sup> Spielman, Fran, "Daley Picks 6 Sites for Youth Centers," *Chicago Sun Times*, December 7, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Documentation Report.

<sup>7</sup> The city had originally planned to provide over \$800,000 per Beacon, but this higher budget level was reduced because of general constraints on the city's budget.

<sup>8</sup> The Youth Development Institute receives funding from the Annie Casey Foundation, the Aaron Diamond Foundation, and the Joseph E. Seagrams and Sons Foundation.

<sup>9</sup> Documentation Report.

<sup>10</sup> For copies of the report, contact the Youth Development Institute at the address cited in note 4.

<sup>11</sup> Lynch, Jo Ellen, Memorandum to Dan McGillis on the Red Hook Beacon, February 9, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Document entitled "Red Hook Profile" prepared by the Red Hook Community Center.

<sup>13</sup> "Red Hook Profile."

<sup>14</sup> Lynch, Memorandum.

<sup>15</sup> The ABC/*Washington Post* periodic survey of 1,500 adults has repeatedly placed crime in the top two concerns of those interviewed during 1995 (e.g., see ABC/*Washington Post* survey data released March 20, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> For example, see Fingerhut, Lois, and Joel Kleinman, "International and Interstate Comparisons of Homicide Among Young Males," *JAMA* 263, 24 (June 27, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, John, and James Howell, *Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Buka and Earl, "Early Determinants of Delinquency and Violence"; and Developmental Research and Programs, *Communities that Care: Risk-Focused Prevention Using the Social Development Strategy*.

<sup>19</sup> Widom, Cathy Spatz, *The Cycle of Violence*, National Institute of Justice Research in Brief, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, October 1992.

## About This Study

This Program Focus was written by Daniel McGillis, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate at Abt Associates Inc. During the author's site visit to the Beacons program, he met with Michele Cahill and Arva Rice of the Fund for the City of New York's Youth Development Institute; Linda Pitts, a former senior official with the New York City Department of Youth Services; and the directors and staff of the Washington Heights, Central Harlem, Red Hook, and Sunset Park Beacons. The assistance of all of these individuals is gratefully acknowledged. For further information about the Beacons, contact Michele Cahill or Arva Rice, Youth Development Institute, Fund for the City of New York, 121 Sixth Avenue, New York, New York 10013-1505.

**On the Cover:** Children learn new ways to interact with one another. (Photo by Laura Dwight)

Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

*The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.*

NCJ 157667

January 1996

---

### U.S. Department of Justice

Office of Justice Programs

*National Institute of Justice*

*Washington, DC 20531*

Official Business

Penalty for Private Use \$300

BULK RATE  
POSTAGE & FEES PAID  
DOJ/NIJ  
Permit No. G-91