

# Gathering under the Big Tent A new perspective on positive youth development

By Doretta McKee, J.D.

It is a well-known and accepted fact that youth must develop a set of skills and acquire certain characteristics if they are to become productive and successful adults in today's contemporary society. Numerous research findings document that too many youth in this country reach adulthood without the skills, resources or knowledge that they need for what comes next — whether it is work, college or life as an adult.

National data paints a discouraging picture. In 2005, Kids Count Data Book found that almost 4 million 18- to 24-year-olds were neither in school nor in the workforce.<sup>1</sup> Edelman, Holzer and Offner, in their book *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men* and Dave Besharov in his book *Disconnected Youth: Toward a Preventive Strategy* agree that the majority of the group are dropouts (or stopouts) because they have been ill-prepared for college or for work life. Youth on the margins of our system — immigrants, first-generation college-goers, teen parents and youth transitioning out of the foster care or justice system — face even greater difficulties.

Are these young people expendable? If not, where will they find the developmental support and opportunities they need to be successful? There must be societal resources for youth who do not have the support and development opportunities that exist for young people who have strong family involvement and live in high-income households. There is a compelling need for America to create a system of support for all youth. Otherwise, the impact on our society in the years that follow will be much more expensive than the costs of investing in youth right now.

What can be done? What is being done?

In 2005, The Forum for Youth Investment, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization based in Washington, D.C., launched a national initiative. The initiative was in response to what the founding members of this organization believed was a failure to communicate a common set of youth-centered goals, a failure to not only translate youth development research into policy and practice, but also a lack of progress in getting research findings implemented in all of the systems and settings where young people spend their time.<sup>2</sup>



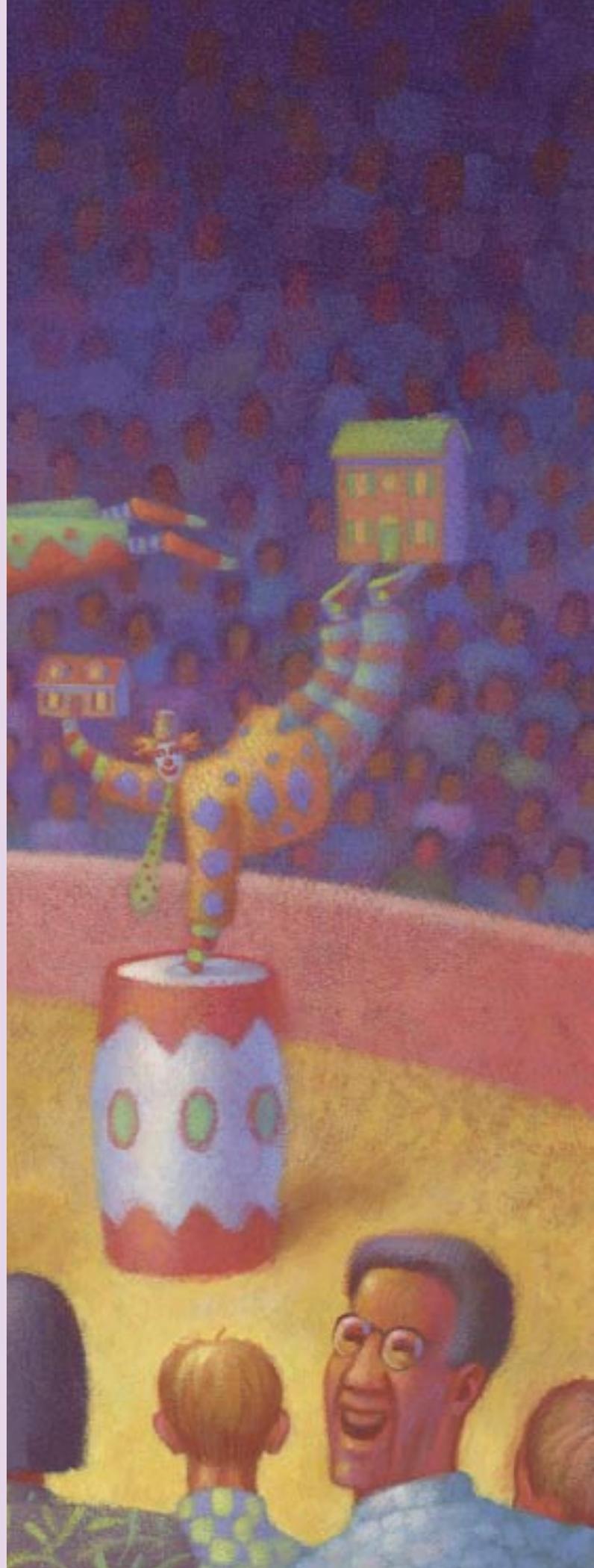
The initiative has its foundation in a belief that all young people need and deserve intentional investments and opportunities for developmental involvement through at least the first two decades of life. These investments must move beyond solving problems and promoting academic achievement to supporting a full range of positive outcomes, basic services, formal and informal supports, and challenging opportunities that help young people to grow physically, socially, emotionally, personally, ethically, civically, vocationally and intellectually. Moreover, the various policies, systems, professionals and volunteers working for and with young people in the allied youth fields<sup>3</sup> need support and encouragement in working together to improve the lives of the nation's young people.

In an effort help clarify the ideal outcome for youth, The Forum adopted and trademarked the phrase, Ready by 21™. It is a powerful statement that captures in simple language the ultimate goal The Forum has articulated for young people as they progress through their developmental years to the point that they are ready to transition into adulthood. Ready by 21™ is a framework of strategies that can help organizations to codify and share the vision, messages and policies that are needed to improve how youth are prepared for adulthood and to increase their odds of succeeding.

Since beginning this initiative, The Forum has partnered with more than 20 national organizations to develop and discuss collaborative strategies that will help policy makers, educators, foundations, and corporations on the national, state, and local levels change the odds for young people in this country. Illinois is one of 29 states and 14 communities across the United States that has taken steps toward making targeted efforts to create a seamless web of community supports for children and youth through sustained, coordinated work at all levels – from practice to program development to community planning to public policy. Steven Guerra, Director of the Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Community Health and Prevention, agrees that Ready by 21™ is the actionable framework that Illinois needs to re-engage providers and get them to agree on a strategy that moves the state forward. Prevention First became an Illinois advocate for Ready by 21™ because it supports the mission and vision of the organization and has a natural fit with the prevention framework that serves as the cornerstone of all Prevention First work.

Last year, Prevention First undertook the challenge of facilitating the first meeting of the Statewide Collaborative for Prevention Advocacy – Ready by 21™ Special Initiative (SCPA/Rb21). With the assistance of The Forum for Youth Investment, the SCPA/Rb21 Collaboration has begun to develop a “road map” for the work that must happen in Illinois.

The following proposed road map was designed to help guide the Collaboration in the development of short-term and long-term actions.



## Step 1: Answer the question: How well are young people in Illinois doing?

For each developmental age range and each outcome area (learning, thriving, connecting, contributing, working), what are the key indicators and measures available to reflect these areas?

## Step 2: Research existing publications and data resources that provide indicators and measures that can be used to plug into a child and youth well-being matrix.

(for example, FYI, Annie E. Casey Foundation reports, etc.) Identify relevant indicators and plot them into a grid to learn where there are data gaps.

## Step 3: Facilitate the dissemination of a Web-based survey that asks SCPA members and their constituencies to answer questions about each Ready by 21™ stage and outcome, from their own perspective.

The survey will also ask respondents to provide a rationale for their responses and any evidence they have to support their opinions.

Early discussions have focused the first steps of the work on creating a “snapshot” of the status of Illinois youth. Research completed by the SCPA/Rb21 Collaboration identified a broad range of agencies and organizations that have created and/or are engaged in the ongoing task of identifying indicators and gathering information that contributes to the picture of Illinois youth. A key outcome of this compilation of data sources will be to encourage consensus on the specific indicators that will serve as benchmarks for tracking progress in each of the five age groups and areas of learning, working, thriving, connecting and leading endorsed in the Ready by 21™ framework.

Once this initial analysis is completed, Illinois change makers will have a better picture of what is known about Illinois youth and how well they are doing. These indicators of Illinois child and youth well-being can be used in a variety of ways including:

- (1) enabling communities to better understand the dynamics of the youth cohort at a sub-state, local level;
- (2) establishing special data reports as benchmarks to track the results of youth investments and progress;
- (3) identifying cultural, gender and ethnicity issues to ensure equity across all Illinois youth.

To enhance this snapshot, the Collaboration developed a Web-based survey. This survey uses the Ready by 21™ framework to ask a series of questions regarding how well the respondent

thinks Illinois young people are doing. Recipients were asked to complete the survey and then forward it to their membership and constituents with a personal note encouraging them to respond. Members were also asked to use their creativity to help young people, community members, parents and others complete the survey. The goal is to have 1,000 responses to the survey.

**What can you do to contribute to the process?** We need your help and input. The survey will continue to be available online. **Please complete the survey and contact your constituents to encourage more participation.** You can access the survey and request current survey results online at [www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=428322369884](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=428322369884).

Join the Statewide Collaborative for Prevention Advocacy and provide outreach to other agencies and organizations – help the SCPA/R621 Collaboration to create a “Big Tent Partnership.” The goal is to engage all relevant systems and sectors in looking at how we can change the current “silo” process of doing business and allocating funds to a process that reflects a holistic approach to examining where Illinois children and youth are and what is needed to improve their outcomes. Ready by 21™ provides a “Galvanizing Big Picture Message” that is grounded in research, tested in the field, accessible to the public, and ready for customizing in accordance with statewide or local needs. The final plan will develop over time, but the first priority is to identify more partners. Invite them to be part of the strategic planning process to identify ways to implement Ready by 21™ change strategies. Illinois change makers must define a proactive strategy that promotes joint advocacy efforts during the January 2007 General Assembly. These efforts must promote activities and events that present a solid case for creating a stable budget allocation at the federal, state and local levels for children, youth and family programs.

*McKee is Prevention First's Director of Special Initiatives.*

### Additional resources and readings:

Rosenbaum, James E., and Ann E. Person. Beyond College for All: Policies and Practices to Improve Transitions into College and Jobs. *Professional School Counseling* 6(4): 252-260.

Brown, B., K. Moore, and S. Bzostek. October 2003. *A Portrait of Well-Being in Early Adulthood: A Report to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation*. Washington, D.C.: Child Trends. Available at: [www.hewlett.org/NR/rdonlyres/B0DB0AF1-02A4-455A-849A-AD582B767AF3/0/FINALCOMPLETEPDF.pdf](http://www.hewlett.org/NR/rdonlyres/B0DB0AF1-02A4-455A-849A-AD582B767AF3/0/FINALCOMPLETEPDF.pdf).

### References

1. Kids Count Data Book. 2005. Annie E. Casey Foundation.
2. Pittman, K. June 2005. *Moving Ideas to Impact*. Remarks at Annual Board Dinner of The Forum for Youth Investment.
3. The Forum uses the term “allied youth fields” to refer to the complex space where people such as child welfare advocates, service/learning researchers, after-school practitioners, prevention specialists, youth development funders and education administrators intersect.