

Dear Colleagues,

The Division of Child Behavioral Health Services (DCBHS) is taking an important step toward further engaging and committing to youth within the system of care in New Jersey. In recent years, the national focus on consumer-driven care and especially youth-guided governance has taken shape. The tasks of youth development are fundamental to the principles of the system of care: as the primary consumers of services, youth must be engaged to identify their strengths and those of their team members, name needs and how to satisfy those needs, and, in the most fundamental way, craft and direct the team around them as they work toward wellness and recovery. In a broader arena, youth must be included in policy and planning decision-making - as full members and expert consultants to the process. A robust system of care is evidenced in the inclusion of youth in every layer of decision-making: from governance structures to individual planning.

Recent meetings with youth have helped to shape the appropriate next steps in this initiative. The youth and youth coaches met with in recent days are very excited and invested in this work. Momentum has built in recent months and DCBHS would like to take advantage of this great opportunity to further engage our youth. Commissioner Kimberly Ricketts and Division Director Nadezhda Robinson have prioritized this initiative, in the midst of many other important projects, because it is imperative that New Jersey remains at the forefront of system of care development and taking the next step with youth development is demonstration of the innovation found in this state.

The full participation of youth in directing the mental health care systems helps to combat stigma and isolation; creates opportunities for our youth to develop a stronger sense of belonging, purpose, and self-esteem; and ensures that we remain honest and focused in our work. The benefits of youth development reach beyond the individual: the entire system profits when youth are given opportunities to make authentic contributions to quality of care.

DCBHS will begin by convening several meetings of youth and stakeholders, particularly those with an historical investment in youth development, to craft the Youth Development Strategic Plan for DCBHS. A draft of the plan will be vetted through a larger group of stakeholders: families, local decision-makers, and service providers. The final plan will be collaboratively developed through this vetting process. Meetings with youth and stakeholders will occur during the summer. The Strategic Plan will be available for further input and discussion in the autumn. We look forward to broad release in the autumn as well with implementation set for spring 2010. We are confident that a realistic, achievable, and solution-focused plan, which capitalizes on existing structures and resources while challenging all of us to do better, will be enthusiastically received by the New Jersey community of providers, advocates, families, stakeholders and, most of all, youth.

Nadezhda Robinson, Ph.D
Director, Division of Child Behavioral Health NJ Department of Children and Families 609.292.4741; fax: 609.396.6960