

## *VOICES OF HILLSIDE YOUTH*

The Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc. recently met with youth between the ages of 13 and 24 from the Hillside community to discuss their feelings about the neighborhood. Here are some of their comments:

**“When you're poor, nobody knows what you're going through. They treat you differently.”**

**“You need to water seeds in order for them to grow.”**

**“Find a way for people to earn money.”**

**“Cops don't give out baseball cards anymore.”**

**“There are a lot of opportunities out there if you look for them.”**

**“Kids want to feel cool and popular.”**

**“In the summer, things get hectic and people fight.”**

**“Bums make you want to go to school.”**

**“We need flyers that say put violence behind us and come to the Boys and Girls Club.”**

*“What has the community done for itself?”*

# A SUMMARY OF YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS IN THE HILLSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD

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Hillside Terrace Resource Center

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**THE PLANNING COUNCIL** is dedicated to advancing and improving the quality of health and well-being of residents in the state of Wisconsin, as well as promoting the equitable and efficient delivery of health and human services by serving as an independent information, education, research and consultative resource to the community.

## **BACKGROUND**

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Hillside is a 456-unit public housing community of one thousand residents, comprised mostly of African-American (97%) single female-headed families (84%). The average family size in Hillside is three and approximately 50% of residents are 18 years of age and younger (80% of residents are under the age of 35). Elderly and disabled persons account for one-fifth of Hillside's residents. The majority of residents in Hillside work (64%), however, a significant number of residents (36%) access social welfare programs (Temporary Aid to Needy Families, Social Security Insurance, or General Assistance).

The Hillside Terrace Resource Center (Resource Center) is a social service satellite office of the Housing Authority for the City of Milwaukee. A primary objective of the Resource Center is to assist residents to become self-sufficient through the provision of health care, education, computer training, youth development and case management services. In the late 1990s, Hillside received funding through a federal program that helps revitalize public housing communities, the Urban Revitalization Demonstration Program, also known as HOPE VI.

## **PURPOSE**

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At the request of staff members from the Resource Center, the Planning Council convened two focus groups with Hillside youth to gain insight into their perceptions and opinions of the neighborhood, law enforcement, involvement with at-risk activities and mentorship. Youth input was requested to assist in the development and expansion of youth program services at the Resource Center.

## **METHOD**

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The Planning Council developed a list of questions on youth perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about the Hillside community, as well as their feelings toward safety and social support. Resource Center staff recruited youth between the ages of 13 and 24 to participate in the focus group (n=16, 5 females and 11 males). Prior to the focus groups, participants completed informed consent forms; and parents were required to sign the form if the participant was under 18 years of age. Participants were provided with a \$15 incentive for their participation.

Two focus groups were held at the Resource Center in February 2007; each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. Two facilitators and two recorders convened the focus groups and an audio transcript of the focus groups was used by recorders to develop notes of each focus group session.

A content analysis of focus group data revealed four major themes. A separate category [Important Issues] was developed to code for data that was captured by existing themes. A coding system was developed and 14 distinct categories were identified.

Limitations: Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. Findings in this report are unique to persons that participated in the focus group and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of all youth in Hillside.

## SUMMARY

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Hillside is a resource rich community with a disproportionately high number of youth. With such a high percentage of youth residents, strong youth programs are an integral part of helping build a sense of identity and connection with the neighborhood among youth. The Boys and Girls Club and Resource Center provides a safe haven for youth because of its range of educational and recreational youth programs and support services. Still, many youth feel the community could be better if housing structures were upgraded, there were more paved walkways and empty fields were made into backyards.

The neighborhood has the potential to be a safer community if relationships with law enforcement improve and residents make better choices that reduce the number of violent or at-risk incidents in the community. Helping remedy conditions in a neighborhood are the result of personal and community values, and actions that promote and sustain the well-being of the community.

Youth feel a need to be supported in making healthy rational decisions and beg for experiences that will provide them with the sense of identity, protection, belonging and respect they desire. Mentorship is an important part of helping youth care more about themselves and make better choices. Although many youth are involved in unsafe activities, quite a number of youth are working, going to school, church, volunteering and participating in community activities.

The strategy to improve quality of life in Hillside is one that must include creating the look and sense of a neighborhood, from the physical structure of housing units to further investment in human capital. Addressing issues of poverty and stigmatization, and further leveraging community resources to equip residents with tools to become self-sustaining, will result in Hillside being a strong, empowered, self-supporting neighborhood.

The purpose of holding focus groups with Hillside youth was to gain insight into the perceptions and opinions of the neighborhood, law enforcement, involvement with at-risk activities and mentorship. Participants feel that Hillside can be a great place to live if youth take advantage of opportunities and make good decisions. Still, participants identified areas of improvement that would make their experience in Hillside better; relationship building, housing design and neighborhood layout, employment assistance, and education on issues affecting youth.

**Hillside Terrace Resource Center  
Youth Focus Group Questions**

General Questions

1. What are some of the things that you like about living in the Hillside neighborhood?  
What do you like best?
2. What are some of the things that you do not like about living in the Hillside neighborhood?  
What do you dislike the most?

Neighborhood Safety

3. What are some of the things that make your neighborhood safe?  
What are some of the things that young people can do to help make it safe?
4. What are some of the things that can make your neighborhood unsafe?  
What are some of the things that you have seen young people do that can make the neighborhood dangerous?

Personal Safety

5. What are some of the things that young people do that make themselves unsafe?  
(Probes: drugs, condoms, bullying)
6. What are some of the causes for young people doing dangerous things?

Law Enforcement

7. What kinds of things do police do to make the neighborhood safe?  
How about the Housing Authority's own security force?
8. How do young people talk about and interact with the police? HA security?

Support and Mentorship

9. Who do you think your friends have as role models?
10. What kind of person do you think makes a good role model?