

Loudoun Youth Study 2006

Report of Findings



Prepared by



David S. Anderson, Ph.D.

Laurie B. Dopkins, Ph.D.

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GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

David S. Anderson, Ph.D.

Professor
College of Education and Human Development
Center for the Advancement of Public Health
703-993-3697
danderso@gmu.edu
www.caph.gmu.edu

Laurie B. Dopkins, Ph.D.

Associate Research Professor
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Center for Social Science Research
703-993-4610
ldopkins@gmu.edu
www.cssr.gmu.edu

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Jeffrey Gorrell, Ph.D., Professor of Education
Dean, College of Education and Human Development

Steven Vallas, Ph.D., Professor and Chair
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Director, Center for Social Science Research

Emily Zimmerman, Ph.D., Research Coordinator
Center for Social Science Research

Justin Lux, Program Resource Manager
Center for the Advancement of Public Health

Peggy Stull, M.Ed., Research Operations Coordinator
Center for the Advancement of Public Health

Melissa Adams, Graduate Research Assistant

Tiffany Yanonsky, Graduate Research Assistant

Lucy Hochstein, Research Assistant

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Loudoun County, Virginia has a long-term commitment to providing a high quality of life for its youth through implementation of a range of forward-thinking initiatives. The Advisory Commission on Youth (ACOY) was established as a citizen group approximately 15 years ago, with direct reporting to the county's Board of Supervisors. Through 2004 and into 2005, a planning process for youth activities and services was conducted by a broad-based steering committee that included discussion groups and development of a vision and goals document. The Youth Advisory Council (YAC) was established in 2005, with broad youth representation from throughout the county. Under the leadership of the county's Board of Supervisors, and with a desire to enhance services and resources to assist its youth with their expressed and identified needs around selected issues, Loudoun County initiated a range of activities. The Loudoun Youth Initiative (LYI) office was established in 2005 to provide coordination of these initiatives. A range of activities and services for youth have subsequently been implemented, including an annual Step Up Loudoun event, a youth-oriented web site, Youth Fest, and other events and services.

In 2006, a formalized needs assessment and strategic planning process was designed and formalized with a Memorandum of Understanding with George Mason University (Mason). Through the range of approaches undertaken with this needs assessment and strategic planning process, a detailed Report of Findings and accompanying Appendix have been prepared by Mason faculty and staff. These materials document the needs assessment and strategic planning activities conducted in close coordination with the county's LYI office.

The *Report of Findings* includes five sections: (1) Introduction, with insights about the historical context of Loudoun's youth initiatives; (2) Overview of Community Youth Development, including published results from community based youth strategies; (3) Loudoun County Highlights, with an overview on a range of issues relevant to youth; (4) Methods and Findings, with results from the three approaches used; and (5) Recommendations, with suggested courses of action for county leaders, a strategic plan, and potential Loudoun-Mason partnership details. This *Executive Summary* provides highlights from the report, with primary attention to the findings, recommendations for county leaders, and a strategic plan.

Overall, leaders in Loudoun County are to be commended for their vision and planning efforts. This research foundation serves as a sound basis upon which to help the county's youth initiatives move forward. The insights gained through this assessment process suggest that the foundations, activities, services, and processes undertaken in Loudoun County are cutting edge and are among the best youth-based approaches in the nation.

Loudoun County Highlights

As with many counties and communities throughout the nation, Loudoun County has a range of services and resources available that are designed to provide for the maximal health, safety, education, and personal development of youth within the county. However, unlike many counties and communities in the nation, Loudoun County has experienced tremendous growth in a very brief period of time. The county has transitioned very quickly from a rural, somewhat distant suburb of Washington, D.C. into a fast paced, highly affluent and integral suburb of the nation's capitol. With this transformation have come shifts in population, congestion, diversity of residents, education, affluence, and many other factors. Also with this transformation have come changes with youth needs and issues facing them, as well as a growing desire to better address these needs.

The county's population has increased nearly 5-fold since 1980, with close to 100,000 residents added in the last five years; currently, the county has more than 85,000 households. Accompanying the growth in size is the change in diversity; while the population in 1980 was overwhelmingly white, this is currently two-thirds of the population. Increasingly, the adult population is more educated; in 1980, approximately 25% of adults had a Bachelor's degree, with this level at 56% now; in 1980, 25% had less than a High School diploma, with a current rate of 5%. The affluence of Loudoun County residents is documented by the fact of a higher per capita income and median household income than Virginia as a whole through the past 25 years. The current median household income in Loudoun is \$98,483, a level nearly twice that found statewide and among the highest in the nation.

Project Research Methods

The research approaches focused upon gaining a greater understanding of the nature and scope of issues surrounding youth in the county, thus providing a sound basis for immediate action as well as for planning future activities. These needs assessment processes were designed so they could be replicated in the future, thus providing an opportunity to monitor the progress of the desired outcomes, as well as to assess new and emerging needs.

Three specific approaches were incorporated in the overall needs assessment process:

1. A **Telephone Survey** was conducted with a random sample of 616 households, and included special populations of youth as well as parents of middle and high school age youth.
2. **Focus Groups** with 104 youth were held in five high schools; the groups were divided by gender (males only, females only, and both males and females) and included 9th grade students and 11th grade students.
3. **Key Informant Interviews** were conducted with 9 county leaders in non-profit, business, government, and school settings; these interviews were conducted on the telephone using a semi-structured questionnaire.

This use of multiple methods - triangulation - incorporates multiple perspectives, thus offering a more comprehensive view and providing increased confidence in the results. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods further enhances the assessment by balancing population level data with insights gleaned from students and community leaders. All processes and instrumentation were conducted with approval from Mason's Human Subjects Review Board; the plan for the focus groups was approved by the county schools administration.

Findings

Community and Youth Overall:

Overwhelmingly, youth and adults involved with this process report that Loudoun County is a desirable place to live and raise children. They note that the county is changing rapidly, in factors such as size, diversity, affluence, and congestion. These changes influence youth and family life, and shape youths' experiences and viewpoints. From an overall perspective, youth in the county are doing well. Support for youth programs is strong throughout the county, with a high value placed on youth engagement. Many county leaders have specific knowledge about how youth are doing. However, community leaders and youth tend to seek quick and simple solutions, typically with budgetary implications.

Youth Engagement Opportunities:

Many youth services, activities and programs are already in place. However, safe, affordable, and accessible places for youth to gather are needed. Currently, youth are provided with some meaningful opportunities for creating their future, done in traditional ways. Opportunities to interact with adults are limited and structured.

Youth Belonging:

Few feelings of ownership or a sense of belonging are found among youth. Belongingness appears to be fragmented, and follows traditional established boundaries such as school, subdivision, race and ethnicity, or income. Further, ties across generations are weak.

Youth Respect for Others:

Throughout the assessment and planning process, the variety of youth engaged showed respect for others. There are, however, indications of an increase in violence among youth through the youth survey. Also, cross cultural issues appear to be percolating under the surface.

Youth Healthy Living:

Overall, youth are making healthy choices for themselves. They value peer resources to be of assistance with personal choices. Relatively little attention is given to factors that promote healthy living among youth.

Foundational Systems:

In Loudoun County, there are community leaders with vision and commitment. The readiness throughout the county for addressing youth needs in a meaningful way is high. However, a lack of public awareness of many of the youth resources that currently exist in the county is found. The county appears to be in a formative, transitional stage regarding youth issues, and would benefit from moving toward institutionalization. Ongoing assessments and evaluation processes are needed to sustain positive outcomes for the county's youth.

Recommendations for County Leaders**Recommendation Area I - Community and Youth Overall**

- County leaders would benefit from maintaining an overall perspective about Loudon's youth, including the fact that, overall the youth are making healthy decisions and are doing well.
- Youth should be viewed from a holistic point of view regarding influences and quality foundations for life.
- The range of resources already existing in the county would benefit from an assessment to review their role and function, for potential involvement in non-traditional ways.
- It is important to create opportunities for positive things to happen, which may be done with limited or no funding.

Recommendation Area II - Youth: Engagement Opportunities

- Actively engage youth in conceptualizing, planning and implementing activities and services.
- Identify a variety of traditional and non-traditional, safe and accessible places to gather.
- Keep the good activities going, and spread them throughout the county.
- Involve and hold accountable a broader group of individuals for the youth-based activities.

Recommendation Area III - Youth: Belonging

- Loudoun leaders should explore with youth what they think it means to be a member of a community, and how community is valuable and is not valuable to them.
- Work with youth to promote welcoming neighborhoods and school environments, through a variety of structured and unstructured services.
- Identify ways for youth to feel a greater sense of “rootedness” within Loudoun County through efforts such as volunteer and service opportunities.
- Look for ways to promote dialog and interaction across age groups and with their peers.
- Reward youth and youth groups for involvement and for engagement.

Recommendation Area IV - Youth: Respect for Others

- Promote greater understanding among youth about constructive ways of handling differences with their peers.
- Provide greater recognition of the variety and breadth of quality initiatives done by youth, by youth groups, and by other groups/organizations/agencies.
- Identify strategies to increase inter-generational dialog and understanding.

Recommendation Area V - Youth: Healthy Living

- Promote healthy living, including knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, in a holistic manner, through involving all sectors of the community. Use marketing approaches and actively involve youth to promote the desired lifestyle behaviors.
- Increase awareness about the wide range of healthy choices that are already being made by youth.
- Identify a range of ways to best address drug and alcohol use from a continuum of care approach, including prevention, intervention, treatment and aftercare.

Recommendation Area VI - Foundational Systems

- Attend to institutionalizing processes, protocols, organizational frameworks, funding, agreements, and related factors for sustainability in the development of strategic plans to address youth issues.
- Actively engage marketing efforts, using traditional and non-traditional approaches, throughout the youth initiatives in the county.
- Systems should be established so that ongoing monitoring and assessment of the achievement of desired outcomes and objectives is achieved.
- Strive to identify, engage and reward an increased number of people, agencies and partners who support and invest in youth.
- Promote and reward collaboration and inter-departmental strategies.

Recommended Strategic Plan

Goal 1 – ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES: *Provide a wide variety of attractive and safe recreational, cultural and social opportunities for youth.*

- To prepare an inventory of current activities and services that directly or indirectly serve youth; this includes what exists as well as gaps.
- To utilize current spaces (public and private) that can be used for teen-focused activities, events and services.
- To identify potential new facilities that provide youth with safe, accessible and affordable places to gather.

- To develop and implement activities and services that are attractive to youth, will supplement existing activities and services, and will help to fill the programmatic gaps.
- To regularly communicate the variety of activities and services serving youth, with a clear audience being youth.

Goal 2 - BELONGING: *Foster opportunities for youth to connect with people and places throughout the county.*

- To learn ways that youth view ‘community’ and ‘belonging.’
- To provide opportunities for involving youth in community activities and events.
- To develop and implement a range of strategies that welcome youth and their families to Loudoun neighborhoods, schools, local area and the county.
- To promote connections for youth across age groups and with their peers. (*Note: This is the same as Objective 3 in Goal 3: Respect for Others*).

Goal 3 – RESPECT FOR OTHERS: *Promote attitudes and skills helpful for quality human interactions within and across generations.*

- To increase youth involvement with and understanding of individuals and groups from a wide range of backgrounds (including race/ethnicity, income level, and region of the county).
- To provide opportunities to celebrate youth accomplishments of individual youth, youth groups, and youth-serving agencies.
- To promote connections for youth across age groups and with their peers. (*Note: This is the same as Objective 4 in Goal 2: Belonging*).

Goal 4 – HEALTHY LIVING: *Enhance programs and services to promote healthy decisions about oneself and one’s body.*

- To prepare a community-wide assessment of places, policies, programs, and services that promote and hinder healthy living for youth in the county; this includes what exists as well as gaps.
- To increase public awareness about traditional problem behavior (such as drug abuse, alcohol abuse, obesity, suicide, etc.) and ways in which these can be more effectively viewed and addressed within a healthy living context.
- To actively involve youth in the coordination of a range of community-based approaches on healthy living, including prevention, intervention, treatment and aftercare.

Goal 5 - FOUNDATIONAL SYSTEMS: *Provide and promote systems, policies and approaches that are essential for undergirding and supporting the implementation of the four identified goals and their objectives.*

- To obtain the active involvement and commitment of a wide range of individuals, groups, business, organizations and others in the implementation of a strategic plan that promotes a true sense of ‘shared responsibility’ for Loudoun County youth.
- To ensure that systems and structures surrounding youth programs and youth development are institutionalized.
- To increase public awareness about the youth-oriented initiatives in Loudoun County, as well as about the opportunities to be involved in these and future initiatives.
- To promote and reward commitment to implementing activities in the strategic plan.
- To develop and implement accountability systems that monitor the strategies and results achieved through the strategic planning processes.
- To communicate the results of the outcomes achieved, as a result of the implementation of the strategic plan.

Loudoun Youth Study 2006: Report of Findings

Section I: Introduction

With a desire of enhancing services and resources in Loudoun County to assist its youth with their expressed and identified needs around selected issues, Loudoun County initiated a range of activities. Under the leadership of the county's Board of Supervisors, the Loudoun Youth Initiative office was established to provide coordination of these initiatives.

This Report of Findings represents the culminating component of a focused assessment of Loudoun County's youth needs and issues. The report emanates from a scope of work developed for implementation by George Mason University (Mason) faculty and staff, in close coordination with the county's Loudoun Youth Initiative (LYI) office.

This Introduction section provides an overview of the Report of Findings and illustrates the context for its content and direction. Initially, the rationale for the project and report is identified. This includes a brief overview of the history of various youth-oriented initiatives and services in the county. This is followed by an overview of the Partnership with Mason. Subsequently, a brief overview of two community-based planning efforts during the time period of the Loudoun-Mason partnership is included.

This Report of Findings is organized within five overall sections:

- 1. Introduction:** insights about the historical context of Loudoun's youth initiatives, as well as activities undertaken within the current scope of work.
- 2. Overview of Community Youth Development:** findings from a brief literature review of published results from community-based strategies focusing on youth, as well as best practices found through a review of publicly available information.
- 3. Loudoun County Highlights:** review of current and recent trends on a range of issues, including population, income, education and drug/alcohol use among youth.
- 4. Methods and Findings:** the results from three scientifically grounded approaches, including telephone interviews, youth focus groups, and key informant interviews with county leaders.
- 5. Recommendations:** suggested courses of action for county leaders, the strategic plan for youth initiatives, and potential directions for the Loudoun-Mason partnership.

Complementing this report is an Appendix with summaries of findings for each of the three methodologies used to gather information. In addition, a Technical Resource Documents compilation has been prepared with additional detailed material.

Rationale and History

As with many counties and communities throughout the nation, Loudoun County has a range of services and resources designed to provide for the maximal health, safety, education, and personal development of youth within the county. However, unlike many counties and communities in the nation, Loudoun County has experienced tremendous growth in a very brief period of time. The county has transitioned very quickly from a rural, somewhat distant suburb of Washington, D.C. into a fast-paced and highly affluent and integral suburb of the nation's capitol. With this transformation have come shifts in population, congestion, diversity of residents, education, affluence, and many other factors. Many of these are outlined in Section III of this Report of Findings. Also with this transformation have come changes in youth needs and the issues facing them, as well as a growing desire to better address these needs.

One of the earliest forward-thinking initiatives of Loudoun County focusing on youth was the establishment of the Advisory Commission on Youth (ACOY). ACOY was formally established as a citizen group under the auspices of the county's Office on Youth, within the Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Services, approximately 15 years ago. In 2005, ACOY was transitioned to report directly to the Board of Supervisors (Board) through the respective appointees as well as through the Board's Human Services Committee, which is comprised of five of the Board members. ACOY has 15 members, consisting of nine Board appointees, three community representatives, and three youth representatives, who volunteer their time and expertise to provide advice to the Board on youth-related issues. ACOY has an overall mission of working with the Loudoun Youth Initiative and the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors to foster the programs and services necessary for the wholesome development of the youth in Loudoun County.

Under the leadership of the county's Board, the LYI was established in 2005. The LYI works within the context of collaborative and cooperative involvement with a range of agencies and organizations, and with the meaningful involvement of youth. The LYI is a consortium of involved citizens representing Loudoun County's government, business, faith-based, education, civic and youth organizations, who commit to coordinate and implement Loudoun County's substantial resources to address challenges identified by Loudoun's youth and adult citizens.

Also established in 2005 was the Youth Advisory Council (YAC). YAC is an all-youth group with a total of 80 members, including representation from the public, private and home schooled populations throughout the county. Members are in grades 8 through 12. Related to this is the establishment of a youth-oriented web site (www.loudounteens.org); this was initiated in 2005.

With a desire of engaging youth in the range of services and activities, Loudoun County leadership established the first Step Up Loudoun conference in 2004. With approximately 450 people in attendance, this day long conference provided an opportunity for youth to demonstrate their leadership skills, and to provide focused direction for future county

initiatives based on their input regarding specific new programs and initiatives. This was repeated in 2005 and 2006 (see section below for more information about 2006 Step Up conference).

The planning of activities and services for youth evolved with the preparation of a vision and goals document. A Steering Committee made up of representatives from government, business, faith-based, education, civic and youth organizations worked to design foundations for the overall initiative. This resulted in the preparation of a document (prepared in spring 2005) that includes a Vision Statement, Mission Statement, Values, and Goals. This document was reviewed and revised by Mason's Center for the Advancement of Public Health (CAPH) and Center for Social Science Research (CSSR) faculty during summer 2006. This resource served as an excellent foundation for the initial formulation and implementation of an organized strategic plan regarding youth services for Loudoun's youth. This strategic plan served as a foundation for the LYI, and prepared LYI for its evolution into new resources and services. It also served as the foundation for the partnership with Mason and for this Report of Findings.

From an overall perspective, leaders in Loudoun County are to be commended for their initial vision and planning efforts. The establishment of a citizen commission, a youth advisory group, and an office within the county's administrative structure were excellent strategies for preparing a sound foundation for youth-based efforts in the county. Further, this foundation serves as a healthy basis upon which to move forward the county's initiatives, so that the efforts would be grounded in good scientific methodology and represented to the greatest extent possible, quality practice. Another point for consideration within this rationale and history segment is that Loudoun County is not alone in its needs regarding youth, or with its desire to implement quality programs and services for youth. The initiatives undertaken with the partnership do not represent a detailed examination of the nation's resources and services from a community perspective; nor did the methodology undertaken represent an attempt to complete a detailed service inventory of resources and initiatives currently undertaken in the county. However, the overall perspective gained through the partnership to be described suggest that the foundations, activities, services, and processes undertaken to prepare quality initiatives for youth are cutting-edge and represent some of the very best that this nation has to offer for youth services.

Partnership with George Mason University

The LYI is undertaken with leadership from the office of the Board of Supervisors of Loudoun County. This long-term initiative has recently been enhanced with an innovative partnership with George Mason University; this partnership provides an opportunity to further ground the LYI with a current, county-oriented scientific foundation. Based on the partnership and initiatives undertaken, grounded activities are being addressed within the context of a strategic plan.

The partnership between Loudoun County and Mason is coordinated by Tim Chesnutt,

Director of the Loudoun Youth Initiative. Mason's leadership is provided by faculty in the CAPH and the CSSR. Leadership is further provided by Mason's Dean of the College of Education and Human Development and Mason's Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. This collective professional service provides direct and indirect services that assist leadership personnel in Loudoun County with formulating specific plans of action for implementation.

The partnership was initiated with a meeting in May 2006, convened by the Dean of the College of Education and Human Development and the Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. At this meeting were four individuals from Loudoun County, including a member of the county's Board of Supervisors (Stephen Snow), the Director of the Loudoun Youth Initiative, the chair of the Advisory Commission on Youth, and a representative from the county's public school system. For Mason were faculty members from Mason's College of Education and Human Development and from its Department of Sociology and Anthropology, as well as from the university's Center for Social Science Research. This meeting served as the foundation for establishing a short-term relationship whereby scientific and academically sound methods could be used to establish a quality needs assessment. Further, the aim was to provide the groundwork for a meaningful and appropriate strategic plan for youth initiatives in the county.

To accomplish this professional partnership, a range of needs assessment activities were identified to be undertaken. These served as foundational in nature, providing a sound basis for immediate action as well as for planning future activities. Further, these needs assessment activities were designed so they could be replicated in the future, thus providing county leadership personnel with an opportunity to monitor the progress of its desired outcomes, as well as to assess new and emerging needs at a future time.

One of the primary outcomes from the needs assessment process was a grounded understanding of needs, issues, gaps, and concerns by a range of individuals in and serving the county. The aim was to have emerging from this process some refined goals and objectives, so that activities, initiatives, policies and other strategies would be both appropriate and measurable over time. The desire was to have specific and measurable objectives developed, so that activities would be based upon current needs, and so that the accomplishment of the objectives can be monitored on an ongoing basis. This helps county leadership personnel to monitor the implementation as well as the effectiveness of implemented strategies, an important consideration in an era of financial constraints.

Three specific approaches were identified to be incorporated in the overall needs assessment process:

1. **Telephone Survey** to be conducted with a randomly-generated sample of adults and youth; adults include those with children as well as those without children.
2. **Focus Groups** to be conducted with randomly-selected youth in high schools throughout the county, including groups with males only, females only, and both males and females.

3. **Key Informant Interviews** to be conducted with county leaders, including those from non-profit, business, government, and school settings.

These scientific, grounded approaches serve as the basis for preparing the strategic planning document. The blend of the three sources of information and data will serve as the foundation for development of the strategic planning document.

A formalized scope of work between Loudoun County and Mason was designed to provide professional services that assist Loudoun County leadership personnel with youth initiatives for the county. The scope of work provided for faculty and staff of Mason to supply direct and indirect services that will assist leadership personnel in Loudoun County with formulating specific plans of action for implementation. Activities included in this scope of work focused upon gaining a greater understanding of the nature and scope of issues surrounding youth in the county, thus providing foundational information suitable for preparation with the strategic planning activities, focusing on youth, being undertaken by county leadership personnel.

Strategic Planning Session

To provide a substantive foundation for the implementation of the activities incorporated in the Memorandum of Understanding between Loudoun County and George Mason University, a strategic planning session was organized by Loudoun County leadership from the county's youth initiative. Held on June 22, 2006, this day long invitational event involved thirty county leaders and youth from a range of groups and settings. Involved were professionals from the county administration, non-profit organizations, law enforcement community, schools, human services agencies, community volunteers, and youth.

The primary aim of the day was to determine potential directions for youth-based initiatives, and the areas of knowledge that existed and that needed refinement. The outcome from the day's discussions and workgroups would be significant for development and implementation of the tasks to be identified subsequently in the scope of work within the Memorandum of Understanding.

The starting point was a review of the four goals that had been adapted by Mason faculty from the previously-generated work prepared by county leaders. The four goals were presented within the context of knowing that these goals are interrelated. The goals were written in ways that honored the intent of the previously developed goals, while also preparing them in a way that allowed for ongoing monitoring and reporting on progress during the immediate and longer-term future. The four goals identified for this strategic planning discussion were:

Goal 1 – **ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES**: Provide a wide variety of attractive and safe recreational, cultural and social opportunities for youth. This incorporates the attention to offering a teen center.

Goal 2 - BELONGING: Foster opportunities for youth to connect with people and places throughout the county. Initial attention will include a focus on transportation, communication and transition issues.

Goal 3 – RESPECT FOR OTHERS: Promote attitudes and skills helpful for quality human interactions within and across generations. Major attention will be upon addressing causes and effects of bullying and strategies for promoting quality interaction skills through comprehensive community-based efforts.

Goal 4 – HEALTHY LIVING: Enhance programs and services to promote healthy decisions about oneself and one’s body. Primary attention initially will be to reduce alcohol, tobacco and other drug use and abuse.

The implementation of the day’s activities involved a series of small group discussions, where each group working on a goal topic area was asked to answer and report on three questions:

1. What do we want to see? What does success look like? How do we know it when we see it?
2. What can we do? How can we get there?
3. What do we need to know? Sources might be youth, adults, stakeholders; community resources, research, professional literature, or best practices.

Through this discussion on each of the four goals, specific comments and action steps were identified. Also identified were resources and people that could be of assistance with further understanding of the goal, as well as implementation of the action steps.

Step Up Loudoun 2006

One of the major events focused on youth was offered on November 9, 2006. Step Up Loudoun served as a time for empowering youth with helping to create the future for youth-based services and youth-oriented strategies and events in the county. Further, it was prepared as an opportunity for bringing other organizations and agencies, including the local business community, to assist with the sponsorship and implementation of youth-oriented services in the county.

Held at the headquarters of AOL, Step Up Loudoun involved 220 youth participants with representation from each of the county’s ten public high schools, as well as youth from the private and home-schooled population. In addition, approximately 50 parents were involved. Each of the participants was provided with plenary sessions outlining the results of the scientific data collection completed to date, as well as motivational talks. Ten desired results were presented, organized in a way that youth could prepare action steps for implementing the overall finding. In small, facilitated discussion groups, participants generated recommendations that were specific and could be implemented during one of three time periods: by the end of the current school year, within one year, and by 2010 (the time by which this year’s high school freshmen would be graduating from school). These short-term

and long-term activities were designed to provide feedback to the Mason project team for consideration for inclusion in the overall strategic planning document.

Ten overall findings compiled to date were presented to the audience. Youth participants were asked to “vote” on their top three choices. A total of five topics were then identified for discussion in smaller groups, with two groups discussing each of the topics. Each group reported a summary of findings, and the groups’ recommendations were conducted at a closing plenary session.

Summary

In review, the history of Loudoun County youth initiatives is a fairly recent one. While youth-based strategies have undoubtedly occurred in the county as well as in the school setting for decades, the recent growth of the county caused a significant change in the overall need for youth-based initiatives. The recent history of approaches, from sponsored events to organizational services and structures, offers a helpful foundation for the implementation of another new initiative – a partnership with a local university that could provide scientific foundations and research-based expertise for helping to move forward Loudoun County’s initiatives.

The leadership of Loudoun County is to be praised for their vision and initiative in establishing the resources that exist within a recent history. They are to be further commended for their courage in establishing a fairly independent process for grounding their initiative; the scope of work identified with George Mason University was such that a range of standard scientific approaches were designed and implemented in an independent manner. The processes involved input and approval for necessary protocols and standards. However, the results obtained were done so in a neutral, scientifically rigorous process. Further, this Report of Findings represents the work of Mason’s faculty and staff, and is done with the highest regard for the quality of the processes of scientific research. The county’s leadership is to be highly commended on multiple counts for “doing the process right.”

Section II: Overview of Community Youth Development

Goals and Methodology

This overview of professional literature accomplishes several purposes. It relates the Loudoun Youth Initiative to the growing body of information about positive youth development, particularly community based efforts. It also identifies some comparable initiatives and draws attention to lessons learned, highlighting successes and challenges. Finally, it provides a starting point for a more systematic study of best practices.

This overview is based upon a preliminary search for reports and peer-reviewed articles in dozens of e-journals through George Mason University's Database Portal, through Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>), and finally through search engines such as Yahoo! to locate descriptions and evaluations of youth development programs on the websites of non-profits and local, state, and federal governments. The most commonly searched phrase was "youth development," which produced many results that claimed to focus on youth development but were instead broad national programs such as 4-H or were short-term, single-issue programs such as tutoring. The focus here is on articles, reports, and URLs to websites that expressed an interest in long-term positive development of all youth in the community.

In total, approximately 80 articles and reports were identified, as well as a few dozen links to local youth development initiatives. Although advanced search operators were utilized, upon reading the articles and reports it was discovered that many focused on single issues affecting at-risk youth. These sources are not included in this literature review. The websites tended to contain information that is more relevant and useful, indicating that current professional literature neglects the study of true youth development initiatives.

Findings

In this initial scan, five national positive youth development initiatives were identified, most of which have a high profile in the field. Three of the better known are the Search Institute, Communities That Care, and America's Promise. Many states and local communities are linked to one of these three organizations and utilize their tools and expertise to guide their efforts. All five have a focus on comprehensive approaches involving partnerships of public, private, and nonprofit organizations working together to promote healthy youth and community well-being.

This preliminary search also revealed more than 20 state and local initiatives that have as their focus community-wide youth development. They can be found across the country in communities of all sizes and types. Most emerged within the last decade and many are linked to local government. Unlike programs that target special at-risk populations, these initiatives seek to include all youth. Rather than focusing on problem behaviors such as

juvenile delinquency or substance abuse, these community-based efforts promote positive outcomes such as youth leadership and civic engagement. Several utilize tools such as Search Institute's Developmental Assets in their local work.

While each state and community initiative tailors efforts to the unique history and local conditions, some common themes do reflect current thinking in the field. Practices that may have particular relevance to Loudoun County include the following.

- Engage youth in conducting a survey to map community assets and needs. Youth are involved throughout the project from designing the survey to gathering data and communicating the results.
- Engage young people in the grant-making process. This encompasses identifying funding priorities, reviewing proposals, and awarding grants. Some communities have mini-grant programs that focus on specific areas (e.g. programs that promote civic engagement or community service) while others are more far-reaching.
- Engage youth in designing and operating neighborhood youth centers as safe places for youth to hangout, learn new skills, and develop positive peer and adult relationships. Youth identified activities from recording studios and stages for productions to rooms for tutoring and mentoring, from health and fitness facilities to art studios. Almost all include game rooms, lounge areas with big screen TV's, and comfortable space for informal gatherings.
- Engage youth in developing a range of apprenticeship, internship and employment opportunities to develop skills, earn educational credits, and/or receive wages. Several communities worked with local businesses to provide a variety of hands-on experiences for youth. Other examples include summer employment programs in the arts or youth services where young people receive stipends to plan and coordinate events.
- Engage youth in developing their own communications media. In one community youth produce a talk show for local networks and are involved in all phases from writing and reporting through filming and editing.

Since the field of community youth development is quite young, there is a relatively small body of research literature. The current scan did identify a few studies published within the past decade that point to the characteristics of effective community partnerships for youth development. Chief among them is leadership from a strong agency. Additional features include a clear purpose and vision, an established organizational structure and membership, collaborative work processes, and mechanisms to sustain momentum.

The preliminary review of the research literature also reveals some challenges. A frequently cited factor is adults' difficulty in perceiving youth as equal members in decision-making rather than as consumers of services. Other challenges include mandates and regulations that prevented schools from becoming more involved, recruiting non-native speakers and promising youth who are not already involved in the community, and keeping partners focused and engaged over a long period.

Section III: Loudoun County Highlights

As with many counties and communities throughout the nation, Loudoun County has a range of services and resources designed to provide for the maximal health, safety, education, and personal development of youth within the county. However, unlike many counties and communities in the nation, Loudoun County has experienced tremendous growth in a very brief period of time. The county has transitioned very quickly from a rural, somewhat distant suburb of Washington, D.C. into a fast-paced, highly affluent and integral suburb of the nation’s capitol. With this transformation have come shifts in population, congestion, diversity of residents, education, affluence, and many other factors. Also with this transformation have come changes in youth needs and the issues facing them, as well as a growing desire to better address these needs.

Loudoun County’s 150 square miles is comprised of a range of settings, from one city (Leesburg) to a variety of smaller towns and communities. As noted in the tables to follow, growth in Loudoun County over the past several decades has been significant. Figure 1 illustrates the current location of the high schools throughout the county. In Figure 2, the major population areas are cited. Each of these Figures includes the major highways, as well as illustrates the proximity of the county to other Virginia counties as well as two states.

Figure 1. Map of Loudoun County’s High Schools



Figure 2. Map of Loudoun County’s Major Communities



Population as a Whole

Since 1980, the population of Loudoun County has increased nearly five-fold, making it one of the fastest growing counties in the nation. In the first five years of this century, the county added nearly 100,000 residents – a number greater than all newcomers between 1990 and 2000. The number of households has grown at an equally rapid pace, reaching more than 85,000 in 2005. As the county works to meet the needs of this quickly increasing population, strains on the infrastructure are evident in everything from traffic congestion to crowded schools.

Table 1. Population and Households in Loudoun County

	Population	Households
1980	57,427	18,653
1990	86,129	30,490
2000	169,599	59,900
2005	255,518	85,608

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980 Census, 1990 Census, Census 2000, 2005 Population Estimates

In addition to growing in size, the population of Loudoun County is also becoming increasingly diverse. As shown in Table 2, whereas in 1980 the population was overwhelmingly white, in 2005 minorities comprised nearly one-third of county residents. As a proportion of the total population, the proportion of black residents seems to have leveled off at 6.5%. In 2005, the largest minority are Asian residents (10.7%) followed by Hispanics (8.5%).

Table 2. Racial and Ethnic Composition of Loudoun County

	White	Black or African American	Asian or Pacific Islander	Mixed or Other Race	Hispanic or Latino (of any race)
1980	51,529	5,018	430	450	853
	88.4%	8.6%	0.7%	0.8%	1.5%
1990	77,095	6,168	2,101	765	2,156
	87.3%	7.0%	2.4%	0.9%	2.4%
2000	140,419	11,683	9,172	8,325	10,089
	78.2%	6.5%	5.1%	4.6%	5.6%
2005	187,887	18,115	29,724	18,886	23,600
	67.5%	6.5%	10.7%	6.9%	8.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980 Census, 1990 Census, 2000 Census, 2005 Population Estimates

The adult population of the county is increasingly well-educated. In 1980, about the same proportion of residents 25 years and older had less than a High School diploma (25%) as had at least a Bachelor's degree (24%). In 2005, more than half of the adults 25 and older had at least a Bachelor's degree (56%), as compared to 5% having less than a High School diploma.

Table 3. Educational Attainment of Loudoun County Residents (25 Years-old and Older)

	Less than High School diploma	High School diploma or GED	Some college or associate degree	Bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree
1980	8168 24.7%	11,219 33.9%	5,944 18.0%	7,773 23.5%
1990	7,346 13.4%	13,376 24.3%	16,300 29.6%	17,999 32.7%
2000	8,182 7.4%	19,358 17.7%	30,318 27.7%	51,709 47.2%
2005	8,210 5.2%	25,555 16.1%	36,576 23.1%	88,288 55.7%

The changes in levels of educational attainment are reflected in the income data for the county. Loudoun County has had a higher per capita income and median household income than Virginia as a whole through the past 25 years. While both have increased during this time period, incomes in the county have increased more rapidly. The median household income in Loudoun in 2005 reached \$98,483 among the highest in the country and nearly twice the \$52,383 found statewide.

Table 4. Per Capita Income and Median Household Income in Loudoun County and Virginia (in dollars)

	Per Capita Income		Median Household Income	
	Loudoun County	Virginia	Loudoun County	Virginia
1980	15,063	12,526	26,660	20,018
1990	20,757	15,713	52,064	33,328
2000	33,530	23,975	80,648	46,677
2005	42,669	30,810	98,483	52,383

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980 Census, 1990 Census, 2000 Census, ESRI forecasts for 2005

Children and Youth

Many of the new residents moving into the county are families with young children. Table 5 shows that while children of all ages show tremendous population growth, the greatest increases are among children under age 5. This puts tremendous pressure on county services of all types for children and youth – from preschools to ball fields. One sign of this is the doubling of youth participation in county sports programs from 31,727 in 2003 to 66,068 in 2005. (Rec Trac System, Loudoun Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Services).

Table 5. Children by Age in Loudoun County

	0–4 years	5–14 years	15–17 years	Total
1980	4,217	10,965	3,611	18,793
1990	7,613	12,282	3,383	23,278
2000	16,461	27,807	6,287	50,555
2005	22,676	40,623	10,552	73,851

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey, 2000 Census, 1990 Census, 1980 Census

The Communities That Care survey, conducted by the Loudoun County school system in 2004 and 2006, provides a glimpse into youth behaviors. Table 6 shows that the majority of middle and high school students are making wise decisions by not using illegal substances and most trends are moving in the right direction. In 2006, nearly one-in-three 10th graders (29%) and almost half of 12th graders (48%) consumed alcohol in the previous 30 days. While limited to a relatively small proportion, use of ecstasy is on the rise, increasing among both 10th graders and 12th graders between 2004 and 2006.

Table 6. Past-30-Day Use of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs by Grade, Loudoun County 2004 and 2006 (Presented as Percentages)

	Loudoun 2004			Loudoun 2006			Increased or Decreased		
	8th	10th	12th	8th	10th	12th	8th	10th	12th
Smokeless Tobacco	1.0	5.1	9.2	0.6	3.0	6.2	↓	↓	↓
Cigarettes	3.9	10.6	27.8	4.1	9.0	24.1	↑	↓	↓
Alcohol	17.6	32.9	51.5	16.6	29.4	48.1	↓	↓	↓
Inhalants	4.6	2.0	1.9	3.8	2.4	0.3	↓	↑	↓
Cocaine	1.0	0.6	2.8	0.3	0.9	3.8	↓	↑	↑
Marijuana	4.6	12.8	26.3	3.4	11.1	21.6	↓	↓	↓
Hallucinogens	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.2	1.6	2.1	↓	↑	↑
Ecstasy	0.7	0.8	1.9	0.8	1.6	3.4	↑	↑	↑
Methamphetamine	0.3	1.2	0.8	–	0.3	–	–	↓	–

Source: 2004 and 2006 Communities That Care Youth Surveys

Table 7 shows that while the vast majority of students are not engaging in delinquent behaviors, several key measures are increasing. The percentage of 10th graders reporting carrying a handgun doubled from 3% in 2004 to 6% in 2006, with 8th graders also increasing. Attacking someone with intent to hurt, however, is on the decline among all three grades. This suggests that while the number of incidents may be falling, they may potentially become more violent.

Table 7. Youth Who Reported Engaging in Antisocial Behaviors, 2004 and 2006 (Presented as Percentages)

	Loudoun 2004			Loudoun 2006			Increased or Decreased		
	8th	10th	12th	8th	10th	12th	8th	10th	12th
Attacking Someone with Intent to Hurt	17.0	14.3	12.8	13.6	12.7	9.3	↓	↓	↓
Attempting to Steal a Vehicle	1.9	3.2	2.2	0.9	3.5	3.1	↓	↑	↑
Being Arrested	3.9	4.1	5.1	3.7	3.5	6.5	↓	↓	↑
Being Drunk or High at School	6.2	11.1	22.3	4.1	11.4	16.2	↓	↑	↓
Carrying a Handgun	3.1	3.0	5.0	4.4	5.9	4.5	↑	↑	↓
Getting Suspended	7.1	6.7	9.7	8.3	7.9	8.6	↑	↑	↓
Selling Drugs	2.9	6.9	10.4	1.8	7.3	11.1	↓	↑	↑
Taking a Handgun to School	0.4	0.6	0.0	0.3	1.6	–	↓	↑	–

Source: 2004 and 2006 Communities That Care Youth Surveys

Section IV: Methods and Findings

This section of the Report of Findings describes the methods used in the assessment and summarizes the major findings. It begins with an overview and then considers each of the three major research methods – a countywide telephone survey, youth focus groups, and key informant interviews with community leaders. After reviewing each of the areas of research separately, these three information strands are woven together with existing data from federal, state and local agencies (such as the U.S. Census, Virginia Department of Education, and the Loudoun Communities That Care survey) to formulate general results. These are organized by topic, rather than method. Five strategic goals emerged from this research, with results presented for the community as a whole and youth overall. The chapter concludes with identifying areas where the data are uncertain, contrary or unavailable and therefore ripe for further research.

For each of the methodologies used, summary findings are provided in this section. A more detailed report for each of these approaches is found in the Appendix.

Methods

To provide a greater understanding of the nature and scope of issues facing youth in Loudoun County, a needs assessment was conducted utilizing three major research methods. The methods are briefly described below.

A Telephone Survey with a random sample of 616 households in the county was completed in the summer of 2006. Special populations included in the survey were parents of middle and high school youth (n=242) and the youth themselves (n=100).

Focus Groups with 104 youth were held in five high schools across the county in the fall of 2006. The focus groups were divided by gender (male only, female only, and both males and females) and included 9th grade students (n=40) and 11th grade students (n=64).

Key Informant Interviews with 9 Loudoun County leaders in non-profit, business, government, and school settings. These interviews were conducted on the telephone, using a semi-structured questionnaire, during the fall of 2006.

This use of multiple methods - triangulation - incorporates a range of perspectives, thus offering a more comprehensive view and providing increased confidence in the results. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods further enhances the assessment by balancing population level data with insights gleaned from students and community leaders.

Human Subjects approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Mason. Copies of consent forms, assent forms, and instruments are included in the Technical Resources Documents.

Telephone Survey

The telephone survey was conducted by the survey lab at Mason's CSSR. Survey questions were generated by Mason faculty and staff in consultation with LYI. The questions incorporate the best practices of telephone survey research to ensure high quality responses from the most representative sample of county residents. The questions were formulated to provide an empirically grounded understanding of the needs, gaps, concerns and priorities among a cross-section of county residents – those living in more developed and less developed areas, parents with middle and high school age children and those without, and from the youth themselves

The telephone sample was a random digit dial (RDD) sample of households in Loudoun County provided by Marketing Systems Group using their GENESYS sampling methodology. The standard GENESYS RDD methodology produces a strict single stage, random sample of residential telephone numbers. The GENESYS RDD sample ensures an equal and known probability of selection for every residential telephone number in the sample frame.

The survey lab utilizes computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) equipment and software to automate the interviewing process. The CATI software allows for sophisticated questionnaire design, including customized skip and branching programming that allows interviewers to seamlessly tailor the interview based upon respondents' answers to key questions. The CATI system provides a complete call management system that manages call-backs and records call outcomes. Quality assurance systems built into the interviewing process include audio monitoring of individual interviews, monitoring call outcomes by interviewer, and checking data values. To help maximize response rates, the CATI system was programmed to call back each household in the sample at least five times until a final disposition was reached. Interviewers set specific call-back appointment times whenever appropriate.

Sample Design

To be as cost-effective and efficient as possible, a three-tiered sampling design was developed (shown in Table 8). The first tier, or foundation, included a representative, general population sample of all Loudoun County adult residents, the goal was to obtain a minimum of 600 completed adult interviews and, in fact, 616 adult interviews were completed.

The second tier includes a subset of the 616 adults. Given the focus on youth, the sampling design sought to interview at least 240 parents of middle and high school age children and we succeeded in completing surveys with 242 such parents. This means that 40% of the adults surveyed are parents of youth in the age group of interest. The rationale for this "oversampling" was to enable in-depth analysis of their responses to questions, including making comparisons to the responses provided by other adults and, in some cases, to the youth.

Table 8. Sample Design for Telephone Survey

Sample Design	Target Number	Number Completed
Tier 1: All Adults	600	616
Tier 2: Parents of middle or high school-age youth	240	242
Tier 3: Middle and high-school age youth	100	100

The third tier of the sampling design called for conducting interviews with at least 100 middle and high school-age youth after interviewing their parents and receiving their permission to talk with their child. Since the survey was conducted during the summer, this proved to be the most challenging part of the design. While most parents consented to have their children interviewed, the youth were frequently not at home which required numerous call-backs to reach them. After considerable effort, CSSR succeeded in reaching the goal of completing 100 youth interviews.

All sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error, meaning that the results of a survey may differ from those which would be obtained if the entire population were interviewed. The size of the sampling error largely depends on the number of respondents. The margin of sampling error in this survey is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points. This means that we can be 95% confident that the true percentage will fall within 3.9% above and below the reported findings. In all sample surveys, the margin of error for subgroups is greater than the margin of error for the entire sample.

Description of the Sample

The survey sample can be described in three ways: (1) number and characteristics of the households (2) number and characteristics of the adults, and (3) number and characteristics of the youth. The breadth of the sample provides even greater confidence that the findings are representative of the county as a whole. All geographic regions, types of dwellings, and age groups are represented. Respondents range from newcomers to longtime residents. Youth reflect the various ages found in middle and high school.

Households

- 616 households surveyed
- 31 different zip codes represented from as far west as Bluemont (20135) and as far north as Lovettsville (20180)
- 26% of survey participants resided in Ashburn, 25% in Leesburg, 23% in Sterling, 8% in Purcellville, and 18% from various other locations within the county (as determined by zip codes)
- 18% of respondents stated that they lived in a “single family detached home on more than one acre,” 54% in a “single family detached home on one acre or less,” 21% in a “townhouse,” 7% in an “apartment or condominium,” and 1% “other”

Adults

- 616 adults surveyed
- 242 adults surveyed were parents of middle or high school aged youth
- 368 adults surveyed were not parents of middle or high school aged youth (referred to here as “other adults”)
- Age range of 70 years; oldest reported respondent was 88 years old
- Mean age of 45 years of age
- 40% Male, 60% Female

Youth

- 100 youths surveyed
- Ages of youth respondents ranged from 11 through 19
- 53% Male, 47% Female
- 93% reported attending public school, 5% private school, 2% home school

Youth Focus Groups

The research plan called for 10 focus groups to be held with youth in Loudoun County. Five high schools were chosen from the 10 high schools within the Loudoun County Public School system: Dominion, Heritage, Loudoun Valley, Park View, and Stone Bridge. These schools were chosen to represent the diverse landscapes and communities within Loudoun County. Loudoun County Public Schools administration approved the proposed plan and gave the researchers permission to contact the respective schools. Initial email contact was made by the research team with the guidance director at each of the five high schools to introduce the team and process. Subsequent contacts consisted of both email and phone conversations with either the guidance directors or the guidance counselors for specific grades. A model was constructed which indicated the particular focus groups to be held at each school.

Two focus groups were held in each of the five high schools. The focus groups consisted of 9th and 11th grade students, and were divided along gender lines to be male, female, and coeducational. Each high school was asked to recruit participants who were representative of their student body. Signed consent forms were obtained for participants. The focus groups were conducted by a member of the research team during October, November, and December 2006. The groups were held in school locations such as career centers, guidance offices, and an auditorium. A total of 104 students participated in the focus groups, consisting of 40 freshmen and 64 juniors. See Table 6 for the breakdown of the focus group participants by school.

At the beginning of each focus group, the member of the research team described the focus group process, and explained that participation was completely voluntary and confidential. Students were asked to sign an assent form, which was collected along with the parental consent forms gathered by the guidance counselors and directors. Pre-determined and approved questions were asked in each focus group. Focus groups generally lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The focus groups were digitally recorded,

and later transcribed for analysis. The questions used in these focus groups are found in the Technical Resource Documents.

Table 9. Sample Design for Loudoun County Youth Focus Groups

	Dominion High School (Sterling)	Heritage High School (Leesburg)	Loudoun Valley High School (Purcellville)	Parkview High School (Sterling)	Stone Bridge High School (Ashburn)	Total
9th Grade Female	7		NA			7
9th Grade Male		7	NA			7
9th Grade Coed			NA	14	12	26
11th Grade Female		9	8			17
11th Grade Male			12	9		21
11th Grade Coed	7				19	26
Total	2 Groups 14 Students	2 Groups 16 Students	2 Groups 20 Students	2 Groups 23 Students	2 Groups 31 Students	10 Groups 104 Students

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with nine community leaders. These individuals represented the administrative, educational, judicial, volunteer, and business sectors of Loudoun County. While not necessarily representative of all perspectives within the county, these individuals were selected based on their involvement with and/or experience working with the county's youth, as well as the important role that they play in formulating youth-based policies and initiatives in the county. These telephone interviews each lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and incorporated a total of 11 questions. The Technical Resource Documents includes the questions used in these interviews.

Findings

This section provides an overview from a large perspective, and identifies overarching themes and important insights. These high-level results are organized into broad topical categories and are supported by findings drawn from the field research conducted as part of this assessment or existing data. It is important to note that the same evidence can often support multiple results. The Appendix contains a summary of findings for each of the three methods used.

Community and Youth Overall

1. Loudoun County is a desirable place to live and raise children.

People like living in Loudoun County. The telephone survey found that more than 90% of adults described the county as an excellent or good place to live. An initial review of indicators commonly associated with community well-being underscore this widespread perception and suggests that Loudoun fares quite well. For example, the poverty rate in 2003 for children in Loudoun County is 4%, compared to 14% in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Similarly, the 2004 teen birth rate is 7 per 1000 in Loudoun, compared to 18 per 1000 in the state as a whole.

2. Loudoun County is rapidly changing in ways that shape youth experiences and viewpoints.

One type of change is the rapid growth – large numbers of people moving to the county, new residential developments, new schools and school boundaries, new roads and businesses. In just the past 25 years, the county had a nearly five-fold population increase and currently exceeds one-quarter of a million residents. The numbers of households and children show similar growth. One manifestation of this growth is increased automobile traffic. Youth in the western part of the county in particular expressed concern over the safety of transportation in their area and the effects of traffic on their community.

The influx of new residents is also changing the demographic and economic composition of the county, bringing it more in line with the metropolitan area as a whole. This is illustrated by the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the county, the higher levels of educational attainment, and the rising median household income. In terms of racial and ethnic diversity, the fastest growing and largest minority are Asian Americans, followed by Hispanics and then African Americans. Looking at educational attainment, whereas the number of adults with a high school education only doubled in the past 25 years, the number with a Bachelors degree or higher increased by a factor of 11 and is currently the most common educational status in the county. The 2005 median household income of \$98,483 makes Loudoun County one of the most affluent counties in the country.

3. Patterns of growth influence youth and family life in many ways.

For example, it can add to a sense among parents of being rushed and perpetually short on time. Community leaders interviewed with the key informant interviews observed several ways that this may have an impact upon youth – parents being away from home due to work, a lack of awareness and involvement in the community. This was echoed in the focus groups in statements such as the following made by a youth: “...like, my

parents, they're so busy that they don't have time to like, you know, go to block parties and hang out with the neighbors..."

Another manifestation is the reliance of youth on the automobile. The phone survey revealed that more than a quarter of middle and high school parents felt that the "availability of safe public transportation for youth to get to activities" was inadequate. Focus groups revealed that availability of transportation was an important factor determining the places where youth hang out. Ninth grade students rely on parents to drive them places, while 11th graders either have cars or drive with friends.

4. Loudoun County is characterized by strong support for youth programs and places high value on youth engagement.

The scientific literature points to the important role played by supportive communities in positive youth development and define them as caring adults, with high expectations for youth, who provide opportunities for their participation. There are many signs that Loudoun is such a place. Youth themselves report that their parents regularly enforce rules in order to keep them protected. Parents, in turn, overwhelmingly support the creation of safe places for youth to gather (including a teen center) and for making available a variety of activities that are attractive to youth. Notably, this support extends beyond places and activities to include opportunities to develop and practice leadership skills and to engage youth in the design of youth services. The phone survey found that this support runs wide and deep throughout the county extending to adults with younger children, grown children, and no children at all. For example, 94% of parents and 95% of other adults state that a "safe place where youth can gather, such as a teen center" is important, and 94% of parents and 93% of other adults believe it is important to engage youth in "designing youth services."

Tangible evidence of this support can be found in the pioneering action taken by elected, appointed and volunteer leaders to create and support organizations such as ACOY, LYI and YAC. Planning and implementing Step Up Loudoun for the past three years is a further embodiment of the county's strong support for youth programs and the high value it places on youth engagement.

5. Loudoun County has specific knowledge about how youth are doing and overall they are doing well.

Gathering and reporting community wide information on youth is important to build public awareness and guide decision making. The Communities That Care (CTC) survey is an example of such an information resource. A cursory review of the 2004 and 2006 CTC findings, which were gathered in conjunction with the Loudoun County Public Schools, suggests that on the whole, problem behaviors are on the decline. Notable exceptions include a reported increase in the use of Ecstasy among 10th and 12th graders, and of 8th and 10th graders carrying a handgun.

6. Community leaders and youth have a tendency to seek quick and simple solutions, typically with budgetary implications, to address youth needs.

The initial strategic planning process undertaken by county leaders, and found with the 2005 strategic plan, demonstrates the desire of accomplishing specific outcomes in a relatively short period of time. While well-intended, the aim is to achieve fairly complex results with a series of activities and services. Similarly, participants in the strategic planning session offered in June of 2006 identified a variety of approaches to be considered to address youth needs. Further, many of the individuals participating in the key informant interview cited strategies for addressing youth needs that were relatively short-term and programmatic in nature.

Youth: Engagement Opportunities

1. Many youth services, activities and programs are already in place.

Youth expressed interest and excitement at the opening of the new Claude Moore Recreation Center in Sterling. While a service inventory was not completed, a quick look at data from the Loudoun County Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Services shows 66,068 youth participating in sports in 2005. Community leaders also mentioned the array of youth services but noted that parents and youth often don't know about them. This lack of awareness was demonstrated in the survey. When parents and youth were asked if they had heard of various services, only three local activities exceeded 40% -- Youth Fest (60% of the youth), the Loudoun Youth Website (47% of youth), and the Youth After School program (50% of adults and 42% of youth).

2. Safe, affordable, accessible places for youth to gather are needed.

This need was expressed by youth, parents and other adults, and community leaders. It often took the form of "teen centers." This term appears to have different meanings to different groups.

Youth in all focus groups expressed the desire for a comfortable space to spend time. They did not feel a sense of ownership over any particular space. Instead they chose places based upon location, availability of transportation and cost. Ninth grade students expressed interest in teen centers or clubs as a low-cost and safe space to hang out and spend their free time. Juniors noted that such places would appeal mainly to younger teens who couldn't drive. One Loudoun Valley High School student who worked at the Purcellville Teen Center stated that "no high schoolers go to the teen center at all" but that younger students attended.

In the focus groups, youth expressed a desire for more things to do and more places to go and often referred to their current options as boring. When asked what they would like, youth mentioned places where they can meet friends – an amusement park, a miniature golf course, a mall such as Tysons, and a city center such as in Reston. Other places mentioned included restaurants, a movie theater, and a gym. The phone survey found that parents of middle and high school age youth are highly supportive of teen centers, a perspective echoed by community leaders.

3. Loudoun youth are provided with some meaningful opportunities for creating their future but they need to be expanded into nontraditional areas.

YAC and Step Up provide excellent opportunities for a relatively small number of youth. The challenge is to scale it up so that more youth can participate and to move into new areas that offer youth opportunities for participation (e.g., youth-involved, youth led discussions) and leadership (e.g. youth as peer counselors, tutors, contributors). Youth seek such involvement and there is strong evidence from the phone survey and key informant interviews that parents, adults and community leaders support it.

4. Opportunities to interact with adults are limited and structured.

While there is an extensive array of services, programs and activities, nearly half of youth surveyed reported that it is challenging to find an adult they can talk to or go to for help. This suggests the need for more informal, community-based settings that provide other venues for interaction.

Youth: Belonging

1. Youth have few feelings of ownership or sense of belonging.

The views of youth regarding safe places are summarized above. When put in the context of belonging it underscores a sense of “rootedness” and identity that transcends the individual. Focus groups revealed that the very concept of “community” proved to be confusing for many students, especially freshman. One factor cited by youth was the dramatic changes in the county. This was felt especially strongly by the youth in the western part of the county. One student from Loudoun Valley put it this way: “When I was a little kid we had 250 acres and now we have 50, ‘cause the land taxes are so high...” Another Loudoun Valley youth lamented a loss of belonging, due to the rapid growth: “There’s no community anymore, we just have houses and people, who just happen to be together.” Another student expressed concern that “it just seems like we’re kind of in transition between like the small town life and the big city kind of deal.”

2. Ties across generations appear weak.

Links between youth and adults were limited to specific occasions or individuals. For example, ninth grade students expressed a greater willingness to turn to established channels (such as teachers, guidance counselors) when they needed help with specific problems. Youth also mentioned specific individuals who are helpful (e.g. a coach).

In general, youth appear to have weak connections with adults. Focus groups indicated that they turn to their friends for advice or help with an issue. In the words of a high school junior: “It’s just a stigma to, it goes back to that so fast lifestyle, we’ve all, because of the lifestyle we live here in Loudoun County, we’ve grown up so fast that we don’t feel like we need to turn to adults for, you know, something like that. We can go talk to our friends about it and we can deal with it ourselves, there’s no reason to go cry to your mother about it or anything ...”

3. *Belongingness appears to be fragmented and follows established boundaries such as school, subdivision, race and ethnicity, or income.*

Barriers expressed by youth include language, age of children, family income, and race. In the words of one youth: "...it depends on what race they are...and how much money..." Lack of a strong sense of community was cited by many interviewed with the key informant interviews; some noted that new minority residents may exhibit a tendency to settle in communities that are relatively established as minority communities, thereby experiencing increased isolation from the larger Loudoun County community due to language barriers. Further, while some key informants noted different needs based on youths' differing backgrounds or cultures, many lacked awareness of unique needs of youth from differing backgrounds or cultures.

Youth: Respect for Others

1. *Loudoun youth who engaged in the assessment and planning process showed respect.*

Research staff obtained first hand knowledge of this interacting with youth involved in the strategic planning event in June, participating in focus groups and Step Up 2006, and YAC. While the settings and expectations differed, the youth consistently behaved in a respectful manner.

2. *There are indications of an increase in violence among youth.*

The CTC data cited earlier shows an increase in youth possessing hand guns. This may be situational and located in specific areas of the county. Youth at one high school remarked that both gangs and police visibility are increasing. As one student noted: "...and in the past month, there have been, I've seen three different occasions where there's been cops with automatic weapons on my street. And like two days ago there was about 15 cop cars down the street, and then a week ago...and then a week before that a guy was shot about 100 feet from my house. Two people were actually shot." Key informant interviews corroborated this and noted a rise in gangs and youth violence.

3. *Cross cultural issues appear to be percolating under the surface.*

To the extent that they are not being addressed, cross cultural issues warrant increased attention. Youth expressed a concern about "differentness" or the "unknown" and associated it with feelings of a lack of safety. For example, youth spoke about how the increase in population and construction make it difficult to feel connected and even safe. As one student put it, "It's hard to feel safe because there are a lot of people coming that you don't know."

This view was shared by a female student at one high school who expressed concern over the increased number of strangers in the community, including "construction workers." Yet another female student echoed this: "You know what, like you know the outlets, sometimes it's really dangerous to go at night in there, 'cause there's like, Spanish, I've been there at night by myself, and one day this guy was following me all over the stores."

With Loudoun's youth, there appears to be limited attention to fully preparing them for a diverse future. School is where youth generally meet new people but it often reflects and reinforces these boundaries. As one student put it: "...when I came here, kind of like all

the Spanish kids just started talking to me, and I was like ‘whoa.’ And like all the black kids like ‘oh, she’s black,’ or ‘oh, she’s Spanish, or she looks this.’ So that’s who I started hanging out with”. The limited range of interactions was noted by other youth as they spoke of the role played by race and family income. One student put it thusly: “It kind of depends on how you look and how you dress.”

Youth: Healthy Living

1. Youth are making healthy choices.

Data from the Communities That Care youth survey, done in 2006 and 2004, shows that use of alcohol and most drugs (over the previous 30 days) has decreased over this two-year period of time. Some substances, such as cocaine and ecstasy, are reportedly up markedly among 10th and 12th grade students. Eighth grade students have lower reported use on virtually all items. Comparisons with national data shows usage rates that, generally, are lower among Loudoun County youth; however, 12th graders in Loudoun County show 30-day usage rates that are higher when compared with national data for cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, hallucinogens and ecstasy. The survey also looked at antisocial behaviors, such as school suspension, being arrested, being drunk or high at school, or attacking someone; most of these had reductions between 2004 and 2006 among students, although some areas do cause concern.

2. Youth value peer resources.

Youth in all focus groups responded that they turn to their friends for advice or help with an issue. Age does seem to be a factor as students indicated a greater willingness to go to their school guidance counselor for help with a broad range of issues in middle school, then by 11th grade students turned to counselors solely for academic matters. While most students indicated that they felt they had enough people to turn to for advice, a coed group of 9th grade students expressed an interest in the creation of an online chat room as an additional resource.

3. Relative to other issues, little attention is given to factors that promote healthy living.

This finding held across all groups. Youth, adults and community leaders did not identify it as a priority issue for the county. When health issues are mentioned the focus tends to be on the negative, problem behaviors (e.g. drugs, alcohol, obesity) and not positive, health promoting behaviors (e.g., exercise, nutrition, stress management).

Foundational Systems

1. There are community leaders with vision and commitment.

Examples include elected officials, appointed leaders and community volunteers who created and support organizations and events such as ACOY, LYI, YAC, and Step Up. These organizations in turn supported the early strategic planning process, planned and implemented Step Up Loudoun, and initiated the partnership with Mason.

2. Community readiness is high.

This refers to the interest and ability of the county to support a positive youth development plan. Many stakeholders have been at the table since the outset. Step Up 2006 had to turn away parents who wanted to participate. The county has built a website

and has established some media ties. Overall, the process of engaging youth and the university is a helpful process.

3. Ongoing evaluation is needed to sustain positive outcomes for Loudoun youth.

County leaders recognize the need for a monitoring and accountability system. They acknowledge that demonstrating the value of effective programs will help build long term support. Thus, it will be important to build systems and monitoring processes so that programs and services can be reviewed on a regular basis. This is necessary because of investments of personnel time and resources that are used, and to make sure that programs and services are occurring in accordance with the desired outcomes. Further, just as needs and issues have changed in recent years, it is important to maintain attention to the needs and issues associated with youth as they change in the years to come, so that services are consistent with these potentially changing needs.

4. Loudoun is in a formative, transitional stage and needs to move towards institutionalization.

Currently, many of the programs and services are implemented because of the vision, dedication, and perseverance of a limited number of individuals in a variety of roles in the county. The good work that has been undertaken to date is noteworthy, yet should be prepared in a way that is more grounded organizationally. The innovative and cutting edge approaches have been part of “the right things at the right time”; it is important that these be reviewed and made more formal so that further development and long-term planning can be achieved.

5. Many youth and adults lack awareness of the resources that already exist in the county.

The telephone survey revealed that many of the resources and activities serving youth were not well understood or recognized by adults as well as youth. The findings reveal that, even for some of the resources and services that had been in operation for more than a year, many individuals (including parents) were not aware of their existence. This can help explain why many youth are not aware of some of the resources and services that the county has to offer. Further, the key informant interviews revealed that, among some of these well-informed and dedicated county leaders, some of the activities, initiatives and services were not known. This is found based on what these county leaders did not cite; the omissions in reporting key resources and services were noteworthy in furthering the information about what services the county already does have.

Further Research

The partnership undergirding this Report of Findings provided the foundation for the Memorandum of Understanding that served as the basis for the activities and services provided by Mason faculty and staff. The funding provided by Loudoun County was helpful for facilitating the initial data collection and strategic planning activities, essential for the effective preparation of this detailed report. Even with this foundation, numerous areas of inquiry were identified, with questions raised for further potential exploration. These become the foundation for further areas of research and evaluation, and serve as

the basis for some of the recommendations in the final section of this report (Recommendations for University Partnership).

One area for further research focuses on an overall services profile of youth-serving initiatives in Loudoun County. While many of the components of services were identified through the process and content of preparing this report and its strategic plan, a complete inventory was not specified nor completed. This may be helpful in identifying the overall capacity of the county's system vis a vis youth issues; this can also focus on youth needs, services, gaps, strains, and opportunities. This can assist in providing a more informed foundation for consideration of implementation of the range of recommendations and strategies incorporated in the strategic plan.

A second area for further research emphasis is a more formalized comparison of Loudoun County with similar communities throughout the nation. A potential strategy is to select a sample of peer counties, with similar demographic and socio-economic profiles, and then examine how youth are doing and what is in place for youth. This would provide a sense of youth-related issues (such as their attitudes, behaviors, needs, and other issues) with the strategies being used in those communities to address these issues.

Third, consideration may be given to identifying the best practices for healthy living that may be found in jurisdictions throughout the nation. This could include approaches that address drug and alcohol use, interpersonal relationships, youth involvement, and other issues of interest to youth and youth-serving organizations.

In a related way, consideration of the variety of approaches that are used to market messages and behaviors to youth can be prepared. That is, what strategies exist that use marketing, social marketing, social norms marketing, and other attention-getting and results-oriented approaches that are appropriate for youth? These may be for issues encompassed within this report, or may be approaches that are with other issues that could be adapted for Loudoun youth.

Another area for potential research revolves around the issue of bullying and/or personal safety. One question is whether these are issues of concern among Loudoun County's middle school youth. It will be beneficial to learn more about "security" and feelings of physical and emotional safety as experienced by youth.

Finally, a question for further study revolves around youth and automobile safety. Some youth in the focus groups expressed this most strongly noting that: "The only real safety issue is kids crashing their cars." They also recounted how a fellow student had recently been in a car accident.

Overall, these areas of research build upon the insights and findings gleaned from the preparation of the strategic plan, found in the final section of this report. These areas can be very interesting for research and study, and may link to the identified recommendations associated with this Report of Findings.

Section V: Recommendations

As a result of the variety of planning and scientific data collection methodologies implemented through the course of this initiative, a range of findings were identified. Elaborated upon in the previous section, these summary findings provide the foundation for a series of recommendations. To assist county leadership personnel with the implementation of strategies, programs, and related initiatives to provide for desired outcomes for youth, these recommendations are organized within three overall frameworks.

First, recommendations for county leadership personnel overall are provided. These recommendations are clustered into six general thematic areas, four of which derive from the initial work prepared for youth in the county. The second recommendation incorporates the overall strategic plan on youth initiatives for the county. This is prepared in a format that is helpful for organizing initiatives and strategies designed specifically for youth. Further, the writing of this strategic plan is done in a way that provides a sound foundation for preparation of monitoring and evaluation activities. The strategic plan is organized so that specific strategies suitable for immediate as well as longer term implementation are identified. Third, recommendations are offered for continuing the positive partnership that has been established between Loudoun County leadership personnel and George Mason University faculty and staff. These build upon the work that has transpired within the relatively short period of time encompassed by the current youth-oriented project. These recommendations are the work of the project's principal investigators, and serve as a foundation for further discussion at both the county and university level.

The summative recommendations provide both broad and specific foundations for implementation of strategies designed to enhance the quality of life for Loudoun County youth. These recommendations are based on the specific background developed over the past several years by Loudoun County personnel in conjunction with youth and youth serving organizations. Further, the recommendations are based on the specific scientific approaches that were identified in the scope of work that served as the background for this work. These recommendations are based on a brief review of professional and publicly available literature regarding community-based youth-serving approaches. Through the processes identified with this initiative, the principal investigators are very confident with the results and their grounding. However, it is important to observe that it is not clear, empirically, how Loudoun County's youth initiatives compare with other, similar counties and communities throughout the nation. While the project staff, through its review of professional and other published literature, finds very few examples of similar quality youth-based initiatives grounded in scientifically sound approaches, a more formal study and analysis was beyond the scope of this effort. The project staff is very encouraged by the collaboration and cooperation throughout Loudoun County – a true team effort – that helped in the accomplishment of these foundational resources and recommendations. Further, the project staff looks forward to continuing to collaborate

and help facilitate truly state of the art strategies that make for meaningful and quality life experiences for Loudoun County's youth.

Recommendations for County Leaders

The following recommendations emerge from the scientifically-grounded information gathering approaches identified in the previous section. These recommendations build upon the range of processes incorporated in the planning activities undertaken by Mason faculty and staff, including the strategic planning session in June, the review of professional and other published literature, and the insights and results gathered during Step Up Loudoun.

The recommendations are organized in six overall areas. The initial area is one that addresses youth from an overall perspective. These were viewed as important to highlight, although no specific strategies are associated with these in the strategic planning document to follow in this Report of Findings. The following four areas parallel the initial four clusters of goals from Loudoun's initial youth-focused strategic planning document. The final area of recommendations is organized to serve as the basis for implementation activities; these critical functions must be addressed to ensure the viability of success of any the remaining recommendations.

With these recommendations, it is important to note that many of these propositions will address more than one area. That is, while a recommendation may be found within one discrete topic, it may, in fact, cut across more than one area.

Recommendation Area I – Community and Youth Overall

1. *County leaders would benefit from maintaining an overall perspective about Loudoun's youth, including the fact that, overall the youth are making healthy decisions and are doing well.*

This also includes having a clear understanding that healthy, safe and productive youth development is a complex and evolving process, for which no single strategy or solution exists. Through a range of youth-serving and youth-oriented strategies that are and could be implemented, the aim is to help youth be productive today and to prepare them in the best way possible to be quality, functioning citizens in the future.

2. *Youth should be viewed from a holistic point of view regarding influences and quality foundations for life.*

It is helpful to acknowledge the multiple sources of influence (e.g., family, school, neighborhood, work, faith community) faced by youth. Further, it is important to have considerations of the overall life of the child, as well as a quality foundation for adulthood.

3. *The range of resources already existing in the county would benefit from an assessment to review their role and function, for potential involvement in non-traditional ways.*

A service inventory would be helpful to identify the range of community services (public, non-profit, business, and volunteer) that currently exist to help youth and their development. Discussions about ways of engaging these and other resources in new and innovative ways would be helpful. Examples may include the use of county facilities, such as community centers, libraries, schools, and recreation centers, as community resources and not just within the scope of functions for which they were initially designed.

4. *It is important to create opportunities for positive things to happen, which may be done with limited or no funding.*

While specific desired outcomes may be preferred it may be a challenge to achieve the desired outcome using traditional approaches. When creating opportunities for positive outcomes, the strategy may be one of designing approaches or places that accomplish, by design, the desired outcome. These may be done without having a specific program or expending limited resources to accomplish this. For example, cultural awareness may be enhanced through service or volunteer opportunities, rather than with a targeted program or activity.

Recommendation Area II - Youth: Engagement Opportunities

1. *Actively engage youth in conceptualizing, planning and implementing activities and services.*

It is important that youth be involved with these activities from the beginning, so that the design most effectively addresses their desired outcomes and they are viewed as being involved and invested in the process. This may include youth involved in leadership roles as well as roles that are not of a leadership nature. Further, it is important to think of involving youth from a school setting as well as from an out-of-school setting.

2. *Identify a variety of traditional and non-traditional, safe and accessible places to gather.*

County leaders and planners should work diligently to continually identify new opportunities (activities and approaches) to meet the current, emerging and changing and varied needs of youth. It is important to think in terms that go beyond the traditional approaches, such as places or services (e.g. ball fields or buildings). These non-traditional approaches may be more process and low-cost in nature.

3. *Keep the good activities going, and spread them throughout the county.*

Loudoun County already has a variety of countywide as well as locally-based programs and services serving youth. These should be maintained, as well as expanded to a wider range of locations throughout the county. Consideration should be provided to expanding the frequency and location of these current services.

4. *Involve and hold accountable a broader group of individuals for the youth-based activities.*

Rather than having the responsibility within a few county agencies or individuals, it would be beneficial to have more individuals, particularly youth, involved in the process. For youth in particular, this broader involvement includes financial decisions, materials development, photography and documentation, research activities, and other events. This provides youth with the opportunity to learn skills and new things outside of the school setting.

Recommendation Area III - Youth: Belonging

1. *Loudoun leaders should explore, with youth, what they think it means to be a member of a community, and how community is valuable and is not valuable to them.*

This includes discussions about how roles and responsibilities as a community member are linked. This process should include attention to topic areas such as affluence, race/ethnicity, and region of county.

2. *Work with youth to promote welcoming neighborhoods and school environments through a variety of structured and unstructured services.*

Specific approaches to be used include a range of public information approaches (e.g., newsletters, blogs). Further, these approaches should pay attention to differences based on cultural/ethnic factors as well as affluence issues.

3. *Identify ways for youth to feel a greater sense of “rootedness” within Loudoun County through efforts such as volunteer and service opportunities.*

Through encouraging participation in these service approaches, Loudoun’s youth may feel a greater sense of involvement within the county.

4. *Look for ways to promote dialog and interaction across age groups and with their peers. (This complements recommendation #3 in Respect for Others).*

This includes youth discussion across grade level, across generations (adults) and with themselves (e.g. focusing on newcomers or on skill areas using approaches such as tutoring). This process will promote self-exchanges and relationship building.

5. *Reward youth and youth groups for involvement and for engagement.*

While some of this is currently happening, this could be significantly expanded to reward individuals and groups for their involvement. A diverse set of criteria could be developed, using a range of standards to which youth and youth groups could aspire and be rewarded.

Recommendation Area IV - Youth: Respect for Others

1. *Promote greater understanding among youth about constructive ways of handling differences with their peers.*

These differences may include areas such as race/ethnicity, region of county, affluence, and gender.

2. *Provide greater recognition of the variety and breadth of quality initiatives done by youth, by youth groups, and by other groups/organizations/agencies.*
The youth-based strategies and approaches, particularly those implemented by youth and youth groups, should be recognized using a range of approaches. This publicity will help honor the quality work being done, as well as to promote greater public awareness about what is occurring in the county.
3. *Identify strategies to increase inter-generational dialog and understanding.* (This complements recommendation #4 in Belonging).
This approach can be done through volunteering and service activities, as well as through other traditional and non-traditional approaches.

Recommendation Area V - Youth: Healthy Living

1. *Promote healthy living, including knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, in a holistic manner, through involving all sectors of the community.*
This suggests identifying ways to promote partnerships and a sense of shared responsibility for creating environments and strategies that promote and reward this.
2. *Use marketing approaches and actively involve youth to promote the desired lifestyle behaviors.*
The desired health, safety, interpersonal, and other behaviors of youth should be marketed actively to youth, perhaps using social marketing as well as marketing or advertising strategies. To maximize effectiveness as well as to promote greater ownership, youth should be actively involved in this process.
3. *Increase awareness about the wide range of healthy choices that are already being made by youth.*
Since many of the decisions being made by youth are positive, this knowledge should be more widely communicated. This may be done through approaches such as social norms marketing, which helps to promote accurate perceptions of others' behavior.
4. *Identify a range of ways to best address drug and alcohol use from a continuum of care approach, including prevention, intervention, treatment and aftercare.*
This includes consideration of traditional and creative approaches, including peer-based efforts, and actively involving youth input.

Recommendation Area VI - Foundational Systems

1. *Attend to institutionalizing processes, protocols, organizational frameworks, funding, agreements, and related factors for sustainability in the development of strategic plans to address youth issues.*
The importance of institutionalization is critical so that specific strategies are grounded for continuation and ongoing development and enhancement. Further, institutionalization of services and organizational frameworks helps to ensure

- continuity that extends beyond personnel transitions with elected, appointed, managerial and volunteer individuals.
2. *Actively engage marketing efforts, using traditional and non-traditional approaches, throughout the youth initiatives in the county.*
These efforts should be designed with variation and market segmentation, so that the desired variety and range of audiences can best be reached.
 3. *Systems should be established so that ongoing monitoring and assessment of the achievement of desired outcomes and objectives is achieved.*
This is designed as a feedback for continual review and improvement.
 4. *Strive to identify, engage and reward an increased number of people, agencies and partners who support and invest in youth.*
For broadening and sustaining the quality strategies, ownership can be shared throughout various sectors of the county.
 5. *Promote and reward collaboration and inter-departmental strategies.*
Funding and investments may be based on evidence of collaboration toward shared goals and meaningful involvement of youth. Challenges (including financial matches) and endorsements can be established for implementation throughout the county, with a range of audiences.

Recommended Strategic Plan

The strategic plan evolves from the findings (in Section IV of this Report of Findings) and the recommendations identified in this section. This strategic plan builds clearly upon the generalized strategic plan developed by Loudoun County personnel in conjunction with community leaders and youth, prepared prior to the implementation of the scientific data collection processes implemented by Mason faculty and staff. The initial portions of this (Vision Statement, Mission Statement, and Values) were drafted by Loudoun County personnel, and were modified slightly by Mason faculty during the initial planning activities.

The strategic plan as a whole is organized into five goals, four of which are directly adapted from the initial Loudoun County initiative. These four goals (Engagement Opportunities, Belonging, Respect for Others, and Healthy Living) were adapted by Mason faculty during the initial partnership activities. In addition, a fifth goal (Foundational Systems) is incorporated because of the essential role that such systems play in the implementation of the initial four goals. That is, these organizational systems are critical for accountability and monitoring, so that the quality work identified with the four original goals can be accomplished. Within each of the four goals, a series of objectives are offered. These objectives are prepared in a manner that lends itself to monitoring from both a process and an outcome perspective. The objectives can be reviewed to ensure that they have, indeed, been implemented through the proposed activities. Further, the objectives are prepared so that their level of accomplishment can

be reviewed on a regular basis. Finally, each objective contains a variety of action steps that can be adopted, both from a short-term as well as from a longer-term perspective.

The shorter-range activities are envisioned as those that can be achieved within the upcoming year, for potential review and sharing at the 2007 Step Up Loudoun event. In total, the strategic plan provides an excellent and grounded starting point for Loudoun County leadership as they seek to provide quality initiatives serving the county's youth.

VISION STATEMENT

The Loudoun Youth Initiative seeks to promote the healthiest and safest living and learning opportunities for youth across the county. Central to the implementation of this initiative is the active and collaborative cooperation among the range of agencies and organizations; essential is the respectful engagement and involvement of a wide range of youth. Meaningful accomplishments will be achieved through attention to the balance between respect for history, traditions and open space, innovative initiatives, and planning for an evolving future state of affairs.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Loudoun Youth Initiative is a consortium of representatives from Loudoun County's government, business, faith-based, education, community, and youth organizations who are committed to providing leadership for achieving the ideals of the Vision Statement. This consortium will achieve this by:

- Identifying, organizing and coordinating the enormous resources available through the County's government, business, educational, faith-based, community and youth organizations;
- Organizing and coordinating initiatives and projects to address the challenges facing our youth;
- Providing technical assistance to bolster the youth outreach, service delivery and community planning efforts; and
- Establishing strategic alliances with other organizations, civic groups, and the community-at-large.

VALUES

The underlying principles that drive the Loudoun Youth Initiative's decisions, priorities, recommendations and approaches:

- Belief in the importance of healthy development for all Loudoun County youth;
- Unselfish collaboration;
- Cooperation and effective communication;
- Accountability;
- Innovative thinking and solutions;
- Willingness to listen and contribute to all facets of the community;
- Integrity, reliability and trust;
- Respect for Loudoun County's youth; and
- Balance between traditions, history, and open spaces and the ongoing changes and challenges facing the community (the "old" and the "new").

GOALS

The following goals and objectives build upon the formative work and research conducted within Loudoun County over the last few years. Further, these goals and objectives are consistent with professional research literature on developmental assets. The first four goals are organized in a way that, while appearing distinct, is actually interrelated; specifically, attention to each of the goals is envisioned to have a positive impact on the other goals. The fifth goal addresses the essential role of foundational systems, and under girds each of the other four goals. The framework of these goals and objectives is prepared in a way that lends itself to ongoing monitoring and reporting on progress during the immediate and longer-term future.

The goals are written for Loudoun County leadership personnel. In particular, the final goal (Foundational Systems) is written for Loudoun County elected officials (e.g., Board of Supervisors), management personnel, appointed officials, and citizen leaders. Each of these individuals and groups has a critical role to play with the implementation of this overall strategic plan.

Goal 1 – ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES: Provide a wide variety of attractive and safe recreational, cultural and social opportunities for youth.

Objective 1: To prepare an inventory of current activities and services that directly or indirectly serve youth.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Develop a framework that includes such factors as age, gender, race/ethnicity, location served, targeted area (e.g., recreational, cultural, social, educational), and focus (e.g., introductory vs. advanced).
- Actively involve youth in the development of the framework, the process of identifying and completing the inventory.
- Assess the inventory's contents for completeness to identify assets, gaps, and areas for future development; both youth and adults should be actively involved in this assessment process.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Establish protocols for updating this inventory on a regular basis (at least annually).
- Monitor the utilization of activities and services, to incorporate utilization, satisfaction, and breadth throughout the county.

Objective 2: To utilize current spaces (public and private) that can be used for teen-focused activities, events and services.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Establish a planning committee with adults (including business owners and community leaders) and youth to identify desired activities, potential locations, and logistical considerations.

- Examine specific public locations (such as school buildings, recreation centers, libraries, and other government or public buildings) that could have spaces adapted and/or allocated for teen-focused events or services.
- Examine specific privately-owned space (such as restaurants, movie theaters, coffee shops, or vacant space) or non-profit locations that could have spaces adapted and/or allocated for teen-focused events or services.
- Build an activity schedule that incorporates strategies that may include such initiatives as teen night clubs, movie theater events, internet cafés, video game clubs, library clubs, coffee shops, fitness centers, learning/tutoring centers, bowling alleys, billiards.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Actively involve youth (to the extent possible based on availability) in the variety of processes essential for implementing these activities and services, to provide them with opportunities to learn new skills (such as financial decision-making, photography, marketing, research, materials development).
- Assess the implementation of the use of spaces, including monitoring use, costs, responses by youth, issues associated with implementation.
- Identify ways to incorporate new spaces for teen-focused activities, events and services.

Objective 3: To identify potential new facilities that provide youth with safe, accessible and affordable places to gather.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Conduct a feasibility study regarding the types and locations of facilities that would be desirable for youth. This includes costs, access, sponsors, marketing, intended users, and timelines.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Actively involve youth (to the extent possible based on availability) in the variety of processes essential for implementing these activities and services, to provide them with opportunities to learn new skills (such as financial decision-making, photography, marketing, research, materials development).
- Pursue opportunities for private investment in youth-oriented facilities to be established in the county. This may include a ‘teen scene’, dance studio, water park, amusement locations.

Objective 4: To develop and implement activities and services that are attractive to youth, will supplement existing activities and services, and will help to fill the programmatic gaps.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Review the inventory of current activities and services (see Goal 1, Objective 1) to assess their value and attractiveness.
- Identify opportunities for new activities and services, with attention to what would be attractive to a wide range of youth.

- Ensure that the processes used are inclusive of underserved youth, whether by region of the county, race/ethnicity, age, or income level.
- Ensure that the activities and services are attractive to a wide range of youth, particularly underserved youth (e.g., by region of the county, race/ethnicity, age, or income level).

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Monitor the utilization of activities and services on a regular basis, to assess participation and satisfaction among participants.
- Assess the attractiveness of activities and services on a regular basis, with attention to non-participants and why they do not participate.
- Establish protocols for continually updating and reviewing the activities and services available in the county.

Objective 5: To regularly communicate the variety of activities and services serving youth, with a clear audience being youth.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Establish a communications committee that identifies desired and potential ways of reaching youth.
- Identify strategies for maintaining the information flow so that content is current.
- Actively communicate and update the activity schedule to a wide variety of youth, parent and other adult audiences. This may include using existing web sites and newspapers/newsletters as well as new strategies.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Monitor the use of the communications approaches, to determine what ways youth actually learn about the activities.
- Identify new ways of reaching youth to keep them informed of activities and services.

Goal 2 - BELONGING: Foster opportunities for youth to connect with people and places throughout the county.

Objective 1: To learn ways that youth view ‘community’ and ‘belonging.’

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Convene a variety of interactive dialogs with youth (e.g., focus groups, guided discussions, semi-structured think tanks) to discern the youths’ perceptions of what community means, being a community member, the value of community, how community exists currently, and how community might be enhanced.
- Encourage youth to communicate what ‘community’ and ‘belonging’ are using a variety of approaches, including photography, art, music, poetry, storytelling, blogs, as well as writing.

- Share the results and insights from these approaches at the Step Up Loudoun event.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Continue the interactive dialogs with youth to revisit changes over time, with attention to age, cultural diversity, and region of the county.
- Build insights about “What is community?” into the program at the annual Step Up Loudoun event.
- Share the results obtained with the ways that youth communicate about community and belonging through a variety of means, including websites, newsletters, blogs, county events, news releases, and more.

Objective 2: To provide opportunities for involving youth in community activities and events.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Build upon the existing success of Youth Fest to further promote connections for youth across the county.
- Incorporate a youth focus in existing festivals and countywide events.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Showcase talent and interest in a variety of cultural and educational events, such as an arts festival, a community festival, and a “Battle of the Bands.”

Objective 3: To develop and implement a range of strategies that welcome youth and their families to Loudoun neighborhoods, schools, local area and the county.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Convene youth discussions to determine what they believe would be most appropriate and helpful in welcoming them and others; this should attend to the range of settings, including schools, neighborhoods, locale and the county as a whole.
- Identify what strategies exist at a variety of levels; these include formal and informal, structured and unstructured, and traditional and non-traditional.
- Identify strategies for promoting sharing and implementing welcoming strategies and approaches at a variety of settings.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Continue to share what strategies are being used to promote welcoming environments, as well as continuing to hear from youth regarding what is helpful and what could be helpful.

Objective 4: To promote connections for youth across age groups and with their peers. (Note: This is the same as Objective 3 in Goal 3: Respect for Others).

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Provide opportunities for youth to have helping roles with younger youth, including such efforts as tutoring, mentoring, and coaching. This can be in school settings as well as out of school settings.

- Provide opportunities for youth to be engaged with their peers, including such efforts as tutoring, skill-building, volunteering, cultural and service activities. This can be in school settings, across schools, and in out of school settings.
- Provide opportunities for youth to be engaged on an intergenerational level, with adults of all ages, including such efforts as mentoring (each with the other), internships, volunteering, and cultural sharing.
- Share these approaches and insights gained in a variety of ways, including web sites, newsletters, blogs, county events, news releases, and more.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Identify ways of further enhancing this variety of approaches to promoting connections.
- Plan ways of rewarding and acknowledging quality, innovative, effective strategies that promote connections for youth.
- Review the value of the range of approaches used to promote connection, to assess their appropriateness for youth and ways they can be modified to best meet youths' needs.

Goal 3 – RESPECT FOR OTHERS: Promote attitudes and skills helpful for quality human interactions within and across generations.

Objective 1: To increase youth involvement with and understanding of individuals and groups from a wide range of backgrounds (including race/ethnicity, income level, and region of the county).

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Youth leadership of a county 'mapping' effort that identifies helpful strategies that involve youth in community-wide (beyond the school) settings.
- Convene discussions with youth about cultural diversity (i.e., what 'culture', 'diversity', 'acceptance', 'understanding' and related topics mean to them).

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Link the mapping and discussions to create strategies for addressing identified needs related to cultural diversity.

Objective 2: To provide opportunities to celebrate youth accomplishments of individual youth, youth groups, and youth-serving agencies.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Youth discussions about ways of celebrating their accomplishments (i.e., what youth believe would be appropriate ways of celebrating their involvement).
- Develop a reward system that would be appropriate and motivational for youth groups and youth-serving organizations; the reward system may be based on a range of factors, such as impact, innovation, reach across the county, addressing cultural diversity issues, youth engagement.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Communicate about youth accomplishments in the community using a range of strategies. This may include publishing in community-teen newspaper, community-teen magazine, or section of local paper with teen focus. It may also include awareness through television, radio, and blogs.

Objective 3: To promote connections for youth across age groups and with their peers. (Note: This is the same as Objective 4 in Goal 2: Belonging).

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Provide opportunities for youth to have helping roles with younger youth, including such efforts as tutoring, mentoring, and coaching. This can be in school settings as well as out of school settings.
- Provide opportunities for youth to be engaged with their peers, including such efforts as tutoring, skill-building, volunteering, cultural and service activities. This can be in school settings, across schools, and in out of school settings.
- Provide opportunities for youth to be engaged on an intergenerational level, with adults of all ages, including such efforts as mentoring (each with the other), internships, volunteering, and cultural sharing.
- Share these approaches and insights gained in a variety of ways, including web sites, newsletters, blogs, county events, news releases, and more.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Identify ways of further enhancing this variety of approaches to promoting connections.
- Plan ways of rewarding and acknowledging quality, innovative, effective strategies that promote connections for youth.
- Review the value of the range of approaches used to promote connection, to assess their appropriateness for youth and ways they can be modified to best meet youths' needs.

Goal 4 – HEALTHY LIVING: Enhance programs and services to promote healthy decisions about oneself and one's body.

Objective 1: To prepare a community-wide assessment of places, policies, programs, and services that promote and hinder healthy living for youth in the county; this includes what exists as well as gaps.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Youth leadership of a county 'mapping' effort that identifies strategies that are helpful, that hinder, and that are missing.
- Convene discussions with youth about healthy living (i.e., what 'healthy living' means, and ways in which nutrition, exercise, mental health, stress, drugs, alcohol, and other related issues are relevant within this).

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Link the mapping and discussions to create strategies for addressing identified needs related to healthy living.

Objective 2: To increase public awareness about traditional problem behavior (such as drug abuse, alcohol abuse, obesity, suicide, etc.) and ways in which these can be more effectively viewed and addressed within a healthy living context.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Convene a group that will facilitate the identification of ways in which other communities, schools, states, and other groups have incorporated social norms marketing and other public awareness campaign approaches to promote healthy living and to address specific problem behavior.
- Actively involve appropriate audiences (e.g., youth, parents, school personnel, community leaders, health professionals, other adults) to assess the viability of adapting model approaches for a range of Loudoun County audiences.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Implement marketing approaches (including social norms marketing).
- Review curriculum and professional personnel training for congruence with marketing approaches identified.

Objective 3: To actively involve youth in the coordination of a range of community-based approaches on healthy living, including prevention, intervention, treatment and aftercare.

Short-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Prepare a youth leadership group(s) (e.g., Youth Advisory Council, school-based youth leadership group) with current knowledge about holistic health and healthy living from the continuum of care approach.
- Prepare an assessment of funding constraints and opportunities for current and future health-related issues.

Long-term approaches for accomplishing this objective include:

- Build and maintain youth-oriented strategies for promoting healthy living, including traditional and creative approaches; this will connect the professional research (from this objective) with the identified county assets and needs (from Goal 4, Objective 1).

Goal 5 - FOUNDATIONAL SYSTEMS: Provide and promote systems, policies and approaches that are essential for under girding and supporting the implementation of the four previously identified goals and their objectives.

Objective 1: To obtain the active involvement and commitment of a wide range of individuals, groups, business, organizations and others in the implementation of a strategic plan that promotes a true sense of 'shared responsibility' for Loudoun County youth.

This involves continual solicitation of new partnerships with the range of constituencies in and serving Loudoun County. Further, this involves the renewal and nurturing of those currently involved with Loudoun's youth initiatives.

Objective 2: To ensure that systems and structures surrounding youth programs and youth development are institutionalized.

This includes, but is not limited to, processes, protocols, organizational frameworks, funding, agreements, and long-term plans.

Objective 3: To promote and reward commitment to implementing activities in the strategic plan.

This includes engaging youth in an active and meaningful manner, as well as rewarding work in collaboration or partnership with other organizations or agencies. This may be done through funding opportunities (e.g., local grants), professional development opportunities, as well as through traditional and non-traditional recognition strategies.

Objective 4: To increase public awareness about the youth-oriented initiatives in Loudoun County, as well as about the opportunities to be involved in these and future initiatives.

This should be done using traditional as well as non-traditional approaches. This also includes awareness by youth, parents, adults, county leaders, school personnel, youth-serving organizations, media, and others.

Objective 5: To develop and implement accountability systems that monitor the strategies and results achieved through the strategic planning processes.

This includes attention to both the processes used as well as the impact obtained. Results obtained can be used to guide program improvement, report service needs, and promote recognition and reward activities.

Objective 6: To communicate the results of the outcomes achieved, as a result of the implementation of the strategic plan.

This will help ensure that a wide range of audiences are more fully aware of the strategies being implemented as well as opportunities for involvement. These results will be obtained from the monitoring approaches implemented (with objective 5).

Recommendations for University Partnership

This final set of recommendations is based on the desire to build upon the quality work that has already been implemented. As noted earlier in this [Report of Findings](#), the county officials providing leadership to the youth-based initiative are to be commended for both initiating appropriate youth-based efforts, as well as to engaging university faculty and staff for grounding the initiative in quality needs assessment processes and strategic planning efforts. The current partnership and its implementation provide many opportunities for further partnership activities. These are outlined in the sections that follow, and may be considered for adoption by Loudoun County leadership personnel and/or by George Mason University leadership personnel.

These recommendations are organized within three broad areas:

1. Implementing the Strategic Plan
2. Moving beyond the Strategic Plan
3. General Youth-Oriented Strategies

With each of the recommendations in the three broad areas, the specific implementation may be undertaken by Mason faculty and staff that include, but extend beyond, those involved in the development and execution of the current research and strategic planning activities. That is, it would be helpful to identify other faculty and staff from other academic units who would be interested in becoming involved with further collaborative initiatives.

Strategies that may be incorporated with the implementation of the strategic plan incorporated within this Report of Findings are diverse and broad-based. These strategies emerge clearly from the current Memorandum of Understanding which incorporates the scientific data collection processes and the development of the strategic plan. One initiative that emerges is the development of additional Memoranda of Understanding that can be of assistance in implementing and monitoring the strategic planning activities and processes. Another initiative is one or more journal articles for publication that illustrate that nature of the collaborative partnership undertaken between Loudoun County and George Mason University. This could serve as a foundation for model partnerships between institutions of higher education and local communities. In a related way, it would be appropriate to identify ways that the process and the outcomes achieved could be shared with other professionals and community leaders at professional conferences and related skill-building sessions. These presentations would reasonably involved Loudoun County leadership personnel, youth from the county, and Mason faculty and staff involved in the process. Finally, it would be appropriate to identify ways of increasing the general public awareness – within the region, as well as nationally – about the nature and scope of the activities, processes, and results achieved. In this regard, making publicly available the summary Executive Summary prepared with this Report of Findings, through processes such as websites, news releases, and information discussion activities.

Potential strategies that could be considered when moving beyond the implementation of the strategic plan build upon the nature of the roles and experiences of the respective organizations. When thinking about moving beyond the current proposed strategic plan, it can be helpful to view the proposed new direction from the perspective of the county leadership (who desire quality services in a cost-effective manner, as well as recognition for their own good work) as well as from the perspective of the university (which desires opportunities for research and service for their faculty and staff as well as students).

Within this context of future directions, county leaders may identify ways in which they could gain further knowledge, expertise, or resource assistance. This was a helpful initiative within the current initiative; similar partnerships could be identified in the future. The county could also profit from facilitating activities or convening by university personnel, and it may be beneficial to host these at the university. From a university perspective, there are potential learning, research and service opportunities for students, faculty and staff; these include, but are not limited to, graduate assistantships and internship program opportunities. The university could also gain research opportunities, again for students, faculty and staff. Service opportunities for volunteering, training, and related initiatives could be undertaken.

From a collective perspective, it may be deemed desirable to have a youth studies initiative. This could promote positive, holistic, community-based youth initiatives, and could be prepared in an overall context of research and grounded approaches, systematic programmatic design, evaluation and monitoring strategies, and youth-serving approaches.

These and other initiatives may be funded with no explicit costs, and some may require funding for achieving the desired outcomes. The funding could come from county sources (such as was the case with the implementation of the current Memorandum of Understanding) and/or from university sources (such as reallocation of faculty responsibilities or funding from Deans' offices or the Provost's office). Further, some of these initiatives may be appropriate for seeking external (such as grant) funding. Through any of these initiatives, as well as through other approaches, there can be mutual gain for both the county as well as the university.

The third area for consideration focuses on general youth-oriented approaches. The quality foundation identified with the current project through its Memorandum of Understanding and associated activities provides insights as well as a series of questions. The approaches implemented in Loudoun County appear to be cutting-edge, with particular attention to the partnership established for needs assessment and strategic planning processes with George Mason University. These local foundations can be expanded to a broader national perspective.

Within this third area are strategies that could be beneficial not only to Loudoun County and George Mason University, but the larger research and community-based organizations, agencies, educational settings, and groups across the Commonwealth as well as throughout the nation. Specifically, this current partnership provides the foundation for further research. One project would be an empirical study of peer counties throughout the nation, examining how youth are doing (e.g., behavior, attitudes) and what community serving organizations and agencies are doing to meet the youths' needs. Another initiative would be research regarding what approaches and strategies are being used at the national and state level, including the federal and state government as well as non-profit organizations and associations. A related consideration would be to convene representatives from the community as well as from the scientific and educational community to explore best practices for promoting the maximum development of youth.

These overall recommendations provide a starting point for discussion about ways to build upon the activities and services encountered during this scope of work between Loudoun County and George Mason University. While the activities and results achieved address the desired specifications regarding ways of better serving youth needs in Loudoun County, the larger question is what is accomplished from this point forward. The foundation has been laid with data collection processes and a series of findings and recommendations. Additional recommendations are provided that help move this initiative from a local project to one that provides a greater resource and service both to Loudoun County as well as to communities throughout the nation.

APPENDIX

Highlights from the Loudoun County Survey on Youth (Telephone Survey Results)

Loudoun County Youth Focus Groups Results

Key Informant Interview Results

