

The Drop-in Dilemma low barriers or high expectations?

By JT (Jerry) Fest

A debate within the youth service community concerns the appropriate philosophy for drop-in centers serving homeless, street-dependent youth. On one side are the advocates of "low barrier" services. They state that drop-in centers should be "ports in the storm," open to anyone without pressure to achieve and providing basic needs services such as food, hygiene options, and clothing. The other side advocates "high expectations," stating that drop-in centers should operate as receiving areas for higher levels of service. Basic needs could still be provided, but only to those youth who are willing to prepare to take the next steps and begin their transition out of street life.

From the "low barrier" perspective, "high expectation" drop-in centers alienate and exclude too many young people from receiving any type of service. They simply give up on the hardest to reach segment of the population and leave them to fend on their own, or to be eventually dealt with by either adult services or the justice system. From the "high expectations" perspective, "low barrier" services simply enable young people to survive in unacceptable lifestyles. Far from assisting them in any meaningful way, they warehouse young people until they age out of youth services without ever achieving any significant change in their life, and with some actually getting worse over time.

Who is right? In my opinion, that's the problem with the whole debate, because both perspectives are absolutely correct. Anyone who has any history with "low barrier" drop-in services is aware of the ineffectiveness of these services at transitioning youth off of the streets. That is not to say that they do not help many youth, and each of us can cite scores of examples of young people who have been successful coming out of "low barrier" drop-ins. But I will submit that this is more due to the capability and resilience of the successful youth than it is to the "low barrier" design, and the honest observer will admit that for every successful youth there are at least as many who have done little more than languish in the drop-in, finally aging out showing little improvement.

But do "high expectation" services do any better? That depends on how you look at it. Statistics can be presented that show a higher percentage of successful outcomes, but these are generally based on the young people who are accepted into services, which is more often than not a dwindling number of youth in terms of the total population served. Those who blow out quickly are generally not counted, and also generally not counted are the increasing number of young people who simply stop seeing the drop-in as a viable resource. "High expectation" designs have seen up to a 50% drop off in the number of youth presenting compared to their former "low barrier" annual numbers.

I would like to suggest that, in terms of their ability to meet the needs of the homeless, street-dependent population, there may be very little difference between the two approaches. "High expectation" services have greater statistical rates of success, but serve a lower number of youth. "Low barrier" services have lower statistical rates of success, but serve a greater number of youth. It may be that both approaches are accomplishing the same thing; providing a context for success that is able to be used by higher functioning youth, some of whom might actually be able to succeed with or without drop-in center support, while failing to significantly assist the larger segment of the population who is in need of such support in order to be successful.

An argument can be made that between the two approaches, the "low barrier" approach is the more humane. At least basic human needs can still be accessed, as opposed to the "high expectation" approach which excludes some youth from services altogether. But if the design of the service fails youth, does it really matter if it fails them immediately or years later when they age out? The bottom line is neither approach is optimally working, so rather than justifying either maybe we should scrap them both and do something else.

What's the point of a drop-in center, anyway? The modern drop-in model in the United States has its roots in the underground "hippie" hotlines that sprung up all over the country in the late 60's and early 70's. These fledgling services tended to focus on short term, crisis oriented interventions such as

draft counseling, bad drug reactions, and crisis pregnancy. Most also served to fill the void created by a complete lack of shelter programs, serving as short term "crash pads." They were Switzerland; a neutral, non-judgmental oasis in a world that offered little or no support to street-dependent young people. Here you find the historic roots of the "low barrier" approach to services.

Much has changed since then. In 1974 the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act was passed by Congress, radically changing the way we treat young people and establishing the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, providing for a national system of services to meet the needs of runaway and street-dependent youth. Shelter, counseling, and medical services that previously existed only as underground alternatives to mainstream adult systems began to be provided through a youth focused, publicly supported service system. Drop-in centers continued to exist, but the functional purpose of a drop-in center began to move away from a resource/service program and toward a form of "stationary outreach." Similar to the purpose of the outreach programs that began to flourish when funding became available in the 90's, the primary purpose of a drop-in center evolved from the delivery of services to first point of contact and relationship development.

This is when the negative effects of a "low barrier" approach began to appear, as a "stationary outreach" program brings considerations that a "mobile" outreach program does not; specifically, a physical environment. Where an outreach program without a physical location allows for relationship development with limited enabling dependence, a drop-in center provides a place to hang and to meet basic needs. On the streets, outreach workers build relationships while offering access to services and only minimally reducing the negative realities of street life -- which, for better or worse, are motivating factors in a young person's decision to make changes. Drop-in centers, as they have evolved, do basically the same thing, but also significantly eliminate many motivations for change. It has long been known that people, to quote Jefferson, "are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable." For too many young people, the "low barriers" hangover from the 60's has made life on the streets far too sufferable.

But is "high expectations" an effective reaction to this reality? The fact that the functional purpose of a drop-in center has evolved away from a resource/service program and toward a form of stationary outreach dictates that attempting to deliver higher levels of transition services using a drop-in approach is going to come with its own set of problems. In this case, instead of making the streets sufferable, the "high expectations" approach will tend to make options to the streets inaccessible. Instead of trapping young people in service dependence, they will exclude young people from service entry. Trying to solve the dependence problem of "low barriers" by frontloading transitional services into a drop-in approach is simply the other side of the 60's hangover, where drop-in centers were seen as multi-service resource points. Both the "low barriers" approach and the "high expectations" approach fail to recognize that things have changed, and that the role of drop-in centers needs to be completely reconsidered.

With the advent of shelter programs capable of providing for housing, hygiene, and basic needs; outreach programs capable of providing for first point of contact and relationship development; and an accepted and publicly funded youth service system capable of providing for higher levels of services and transition needs; an argument can be made that the drop-in center has had its day and is no longer a needed element of a comprehensive approach to homeless youth. But before we throw out the drop-in, I would like to suggest that a change in the way we perceive the purpose of drop-in centers may allow them to once again serve a critical role in helping young people leave the streets. Part of that change is in how we define "low barriers" and "high expectations."

When we speak of "low barriers" we are really saying that little or nothing is required of or expected from a young person in order to access and take advantage of whatever services are offered. Unfortunately, no matter how we try to put a noble spin on it by saying that we are "meeting youth where they are at" or we are being "nonjudgmental and inclusive," the reality is that this definition of "low barriers" translates in the youth's experience as us having low or no expectations. It should surprise no one, then, that many youth do not change in this environment, as it is basic Youth Development Best Practice knowledge that young people live up to or down to our expectations. But before you see me as an advocate of the "high expectations" approach as it is currently being practiced, let me clarify what High Expectations means in the Youth Development context.

Without going into a full blown Youth Development presentation¹, High Expectations is one of the three primary protective factors that fosters innate resilience and promotes developmental outcomes (the other two being Caring/Supportive Relationships, and Meaningful Participation). But High Expectations is not a reference to goal accomplishment or achievement outcomes, such as completing education, finding stable housing, or any of the other achievement oriented activities promoted by the current "high expectations" trend. Rather, High Expectations is a definition of the relationships to which a young person is exposed and the environment in which the young person operates. Every message the young person receives is one that speaks to their resilience, capability, and potential -- regardless of the actual actions and behavior of the young person. That is not to say that a youth can act without consequence, only that a youth's actions do not define who they are or what they are capable of.

We know that the modern drop-in is really a form of stationary outreach, and as such is not the best method for the delivery of achievement oriented services. We also know that the primary characteristic that distinguishes a drop-in center from an outreach program is a physical environment. So, perhaps if we are going to use this approach, the best use would be to utilize the environment as a means of exposing young people to High Expectations not in the achievement sense, but in the Youth Development sense. We could then design them in such a way as to be inclusive of all young people without the "low expectations" consequence of the old "low barriers" approach.

How would this look in practice? Drop-in centers would no longer be seen as service delivery designs. Instead, they would capitalize on their stationary outreach function and utilize the environment they provide to focus on opportunities and engagement. Whether or not basic needs could be met in the center would be secondary to the center's primary purpose of engaging the population in activities that promote developmental, rather than achievement, outcomes. Instead of focusing on the relief of the food/clothing/shelter deficits inherent in street life, they would focus on one of the biggest -- and most ignored -- deficits that exists on the streets; *a deficit of meaningful activity*. Ask any street-dependent youth what street life is really like and they will tell you that it is excruciatingly boring. Why do you see so much drama and created conflict on the streets? Why is it so easy for youth on the streets to get into so much avoidable trouble, despite the fact that they are generally intelligent, capable people? It's a simple answer: they're freaking bored!

Now imagine that they have a place available to them where they are not mandated to achieve, but rather are exposed to an environment of relevant, meaningful activities in which they could voluntarily participate. All of these activities would be opportunities that are supported by the drop-in staff with a focus on developmental rather than achievement outcomes. When a youth's development prepares them for achievement, the drop-in would provide access to such higher levels of service, and until that time the environment of the drop-in would continue to work on each youth's capabilities and personal growth. There would be no barriers to drop-in utilization, as all activities would be voluntary -- and a young person who was "abusing" the center by not participating in meaningful activity would not be seen as a problem. Rather, the problem would be that the center was not providing a meaningful engagement strategy that was relevant to that young person, and it would be the center's challenge to find one that is or to assist the young person in creating their own meaningful outlet.

Every young person has capabilities and interests that can be channeled into meaningful activities that promote development, and when those are discovered mandates are not required as a youth will voluntarily participate in activities that are attractive and relevant to them. Participation in such activities in an environment of support and High Expectations in the Youth Development sense will prepare young people to advance into higher levels of service when they are developmentally ready to do so. By changing the role of a drop-in center away from either survival "hang outs" or achievement services, and using the approach to provide opportunity and engagement environments to promote development, we can retain the best of the "low barriers" and "high expectations" approaches without the negative side effects of either enabling or excluding.

¹ For more information on the Youth Development approach, read "An Introduction to PYD" available on the homepage of the [InterNetwork for Youth](#).