

**Changing the Emphasis: Addressing the Needs of Middle School Youth**

**Beacon Community Centers Concept Paper**

**September 25, 2006**

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## **I. Introduction**

A hallmark initiative of the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), the Beacon programs (“Beacons”) are collaborative, school-based community centers. Pioneered in the early 1990’s at a time of widespread concern about crime and drugs in New York City, Beacons were conceived as multi-service “safe havens.” Using space in school buildings during non-school hours, the Beacons were designed to give youth positive experiences in safe, welcoming settings to promote their healthy social and emotional development, thereby helping them fulfill their potential.

The Beacon model is recognized nationally as a flagship for positive youth development and has been replicated in San Francisco, Philadelphia and other parts of the nation. It signaled a shift in thinking about challenges in urban neighborhoods characterized by high rates of poverty, substance abuse, and crime. Instead of targeting youth problems and deficits, the Beacon programs would focus on and nurture youth assets through high quality, engaging activities and services.

Today, DYCD supports 80 Beacon programs, sixteen of which also host Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) foster care prevention programs. Together, these programs serve approximately 170,000 participants annually.

This concept paper sets out the major anticipated changes in the next Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Beacon Community Centers.

### *Looking to the future*

The fifteenth anniversary of the first Beacon programs is a moment for reflection as well as celebration. While the Beacon model has withstood the test of time, in thinking about the future, it is essential to take account of new research and a changing landscape of resources and challenges.

Developments in recent years suggest that Beacon efforts, at this juncture, should be more sharply focused on quality services for young adolescents. It is well-known that participation in out-of-school programs declines when students leave elementary school. This is also a time when youth can become involved in risky or dangerous behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Structured activities with defined outcomes that are well-planned and properly implemented can provide benefits and counter the risks adolescents face during middle school years. Effective programs that develop literacy, numeracy, and life-skills, nurture youth employability, and promote healthy life-styles, can lay the foundation for future success for youth and their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> The need to help adolescents transition to middle school is widely recognized and many of those who participated in DYCD’s strategic planning process regarded middle school youth as a priority.

As school-based community centers, the Beacons have a direct role in building relationships between schools and the communities which they serve. For example, Beacons can bring the cultural and social assets of the community into the school, helping to boost morale and promote a stronger sense of belonging among students and their families.<sup>2</sup> Beacon programs also have the potential to be a focal point for fostering a sense of community and partnership among a wider array of stakeholders including residents, neighboring schools, local colleges, health and social service providers, the police, and elected officials. Successful collaborations increase resources for everyone.

At a time when schools are facing many changes and heightened expectations, the quality of the Beacon-school relationship is more critical than ever. To support the Beacons and their host schools in their collaborative endeavors, DYCD is working with the New York City Department of Education to identify ways in which both agencies can help schools and Beacon programs strengthen their relationships and forge other strategic partnerships.

### *Changing Landscape*

In thinking about the future, DYCD must take the changing environment in which the Beacons operate into account. Of particular significance are the efforts of the Bloomberg administration to pursue “the spirit, as well as the letter, of No Child Left Behind.”<sup>3</sup> The Department of Education, now a mayoral agency, has initiated many reforms affecting all aspects of the school system. These include alterations in the school curriculum and teacher and principal hiring and training. These changes, designed to raise student achievement levels, have been combined with substantial organizational restructuring. This has involved the conversion of many large schools into smaller units as well as the introduction of “empowerment schools” giving principals much greater autonomy. All these reforms are creating increased opportunities for outside organizations to work with schools, especially in communities where schools lack resources to develop their own extracurricular activities.

Another notable development is the expansion of out-of-school time (OST) programs in New York City. In the fall of 2005, DYCD launched the largest municipally-funded OST initiative in the nation. OST programs (whether funded by DYCD or other sponsors) now represent a significant new pool of youth development resources, especially for younger children.

However, while these changes and educational reforms are showing results particularly in the lower grades, there are continuing concerns about high school graduation and dropout rates among many New York City youth, and about the numbers of youth entering post-secondary education.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Mark R. Warren. *Communities and Schools: A New View of Urban Educational Reform*. Harvard Educational Review. Vol. 75 No 2. Summer 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The federal “No Child Left Behind” Act passed in 2001. See overview of related reforms described by the NYC Department of Education at <http://www.nycenet.edu/Administration/NCLB/default.htm>

<sup>4</sup> According to a recently published report from the New York City Department of Education, 14.8 percent of students dropped out at the end of four years in 2005. Dropout rates were higher among Black students (15.2 percent) and Hispanic students (19.2 percent.) The class of 2005 Four Year Longitudinal Report and

Authors of a recent research study highlighted the fact that failure in high school is predictable during middle school.<sup>5</sup> They stressed the need for coordinated, integrated, and comprehensive approaches based on effective partnerships between schools and social service providers. They concluded that timely interventions, based on recognition of the impact of adolescence and poverty, can prevent today's middle school students from becoming tomorrow's high school drop-outs.

Forces that put students at risk for drop-out take shape during middle school years as they seek to establish a sense of identity in a new and more challenging environment. Young adolescents struggle simultaneously with developmental changes on many fronts -- physical, intellectual, emotional, and social. Youth programs that offer constructive and rewarding activities increase resiliency and can help forestall involvement in risky behaviors such as skipping school, smoking, and experimentation with drugs and sex.

Along with changes in the school system and the expansion of OST programs, one further development deserves mention: increased recognition of civic engagement as a critical tool for youth development. This covers a wide range of activities including volunteering (for example, with seniors, homeless people, and people with disabilities), beautification of city blocks and parks clean-up, and projects relating to neighborhood/social justice issues. These kinds of activities attract people of all ages, promote responsible citizenship and help build communities. They also offer exceptional opportunities for adolescents to develop a sense of agency, empowerment, and social responsibility, and teach leadership, teamwork, and other skills that help young people grow into well-functioning, mature adults.

## **II. Purpose of the RFP**

### *Changing the emphasis*

The changing context in which the Beacons operate, as well as research highlighting the importance of services and support for youth transitioning to middle school, provide the opportunity and rationale for changing the emphasis of Beacon programs. The Beacon model combines a clearly-defined youth development framework with a strong community focus. Given their relative freedom in terms of program planning and design and their ability to promote intergenerational and community-centered activities, the Beacons are well-placed to develop attractive and effective programming for middle school youth.

It is increasingly recognized that high quality programs for adolescents contribute to their current and future well-being. In New York City, many young people find it hard to

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2004-2005 Event Dropout Rates. New York City Department of Education, Assessment and Accountability. Class of 2005\_Four-Year\_Longitudinal\_Report.pdf. See also, The Missing Black Men. Inside Higher Ed. December 5, 2005 at <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2005/12/05/blackmale>

<sup>5</sup> Keeping Middle Grades Students On Track to Graduation. Robert Balfanz, Johns Hopkins University. Liza Herzog., Philadelphia Education Fund. February 2006

prosper and fulfill their potential without activities to enrich their education and promote their healthy development. Survey evidence also suggests that more adolescents would participate in programs if offered sufficient choice, an attractive mix of activities, and schedules with some flexibility. Therefore, it is anticipated that the upcoming RFP would require the Beacons to marshal their resources to offer a comprehensive range of services designed to engage, support and retain middle school youth. These services would comprise structured activities with specific goals, attendance requirements, and defined outcomes.

Since traditional ways of recruiting program participants, such as through fliers or letters to parents, do not necessarily work in the case of older or hard-to-reach youth, including middle school students, the Beacons would be expected to develop other strategies. Researchers and practitioners have identified a number of promising approaches. These include: reaching out directly to youth and their families in their homes and communities as well as at the school; enlisting youth participants as ambassadors for the program; recruiting friends to join together; enlisting help from principals, teachers and other staff in efforts to communicate the benefits of the program to students and their families; and seeking opportunities for program staff to share information about Beacon activities at school meetings/events, including having program participants demonstrate skills they learned through the program.<sup>6</sup>

A sharper focus on the needs of adolescents would mean, wherever possible, that programs would be located in middle schools. However, the re-location of Beacons with ACS Foster Care Prevention programs that are currently based in elementary schools is not anticipated. The Beacons would also continue to operate as community centers serving people of all ages. Thus, they would be expected to provide a range of drop-in activities and community events for adults and youth; and, based on demonstrated need, would also be permitted to offer regular services such as homework help and summer camp for children in elementary grades.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the purpose of the proposed change of emphasis would be to ensure that substantially more Beacon resources are dedicated to programming for middle school youth.

#### *Program characteristics and components*

Ideally, Beacon programs reflect the principles of positive youth development and high levels of community involvement. Within this framework, successful contractors would be expected to demonstrate their ability to offer an attractive menu of activities, enhancing their programming through sub-contracts and partnerships with unpaid co-

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Moving Beyond the Barriers. *Harvard Family Research Project*. Issues and Opportunities in Out-of School Time Evaluation. Number 6 July 2004. [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html); and, Priscilla Little, M.A., and Sherri Lauver. Strategies for attracting and sustaining participation in after-school programs. *The School Administrator*. May 2005. [www.aasa.org/publications](http://www.aasa.org/publications).

<sup>7</sup> Provided they operate in compliance with the New York State Office of Children and Family Services School-Age Child Care regulations.

locators. Thus, while other individuals or organizations may provide Beacon services, the contractor would remain responsible for ensuring adherence to the tenets of the Beacon model.

Successful program designs would incorporate the following characteristics and components:

- Environments in which participants feel physically and emotionally safe;
- Structured activities for adolescents supplemented by drop-in activities and community events for youth and adults;
- Supportive youth-adult and peer-to-peer relationships that foster positive social norms and set high expectations;
- Effective strategies for recruiting and retaining adolescent participants.
- Activities for adolescents that build social skills/competencies and give a sense of agency, empowerment, and achievement;
- Participant involvement in program planning and implementation;
- Intergenerational and community-centered activities;
- Opportunities for civic engagement, community service, and volunteering;
- Counseling and supportive services and/or an effective referrals system;
- Trained and experienced, culturally-competent staff (including volunteers) who are equipped for their jobs and present positive adult role models;
- Access to ongoing training and regular professional development for all staff.

Beacon programs offer youth and adults a range of age- and developmentally-appropriate activities to promote well-being, foster a sense of social connection and belonging, and reflect the distinctive needs and interests of the community. Their efforts focus on six core activity areas: *academic enhancement, life-skills, career awareness/school-to-work transition, civic engagement/community building, recreation/health and fitness, and culture/art.* (See below.)

#### *Middle school focus and core activity areas*

In the case of middle school students, it is anticipated that the RFP would require contractors to offer a range of structured activities in the six core areas described below. Services in up to three of the six areas could be provided through co-locators, and up to 30 percent of DYCD funds could be used to provide these services through sub-contractors or consultants.

- *Academic enhancement.* Educational services to support and enhance basic math, reading, writing, and oral English skills, and encourage regular school attendance. Activities would augment school-day activities through alternative learning strategies and might include tutoring, homework assistance, reading clubs, and computer-assisted and project-based learning.
- *Life-skills.* These activities (and services such as mentoring/counseling) would be designed to increase personal responsibility, self-esteem and confidence, develop

decision-making and problem-solving skills, and foster positive social and emotional development. The aim would be to promote self-sufficiency and the capacity for meaningful relationships with peers and adults. Programming to promote healthy life-styles, to prevent and address substance abuse, and to educate participants about HIV and HIV prevention would be required components.<sup>8</sup>

- *Career awareness/school-to-work transition.* Contractors would be required to use a DYCD-approved work readiness curriculum covering a broad range of career-oriented and workforce development activities including workplace visits, business/industry research, business/corporation presentations, job readiness training, career exploration workshops, and resume writing, job search training, paid or unpaid internships, work experience and job shadowing.
- *Civic engagement/community building.* This would include activities designed to strengthen leadership skills and foster civic responsibility, individual and team volunteering/service projects, youth leadership programs, projects that identify and address neighborhood issues (such as ComNet programs), and activities that focus on social justice issues, including community forums.
- *Recreation/health and fitness.* Recreational activities would include basketball, swimming, and other sports, and activities such as martial arts. Health and fitness would include aerobics and fitness training, and other physical activities undertaken on a regular basis.
- *Culture/art.* Activities in this area would include art, music, dance, spoken word/poetry, and drama; field trips to museums, art galleries, and historical sites; and cultural events/projects.

### *Other programming*

In addition to the services for middle school youth, it is anticipated that the RFP would require the Beacons to continue to offer a range of drop-in activities and community events that reflect the core activity areas. Contractors would also be permitted to offer certain planned activities on a regular basis, for children, youth, and adults in response to demonstrated need: for example, health/fitness or computer classes for older youth and adults; homework help and summer camp for children in elementary grades; and paid or unpaid internships for high school students.

It is anticipated that the RFP would allow up to 75% of services other than structured services for middle school youth to be provided by co-locators.

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<sup>8</sup> The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (Issue 24, 2005) reports that in 2003-2004, 6.4 percent (1.5 million) of youth aged 12 to 17 were classified as needing treatment for alcohol use, and 5.4 percent (1.4 million) needed treatment for illicit drug use.

### *Staff qualifications and training*

DYCD expects all Beacon staff to be culturally-competent, well-trained individuals who understand and adhere to the principles of positive youth development. Research suggests that program quality is linked to staff education and training. It is therefore anticipated that the RFP would require all paid staff to be 18 years or older but would allow high school students and volunteers to assist program staff, provided they are properly trained and supervised. It is anticipated that Beacons will be encouraged in the RFP to use older youth as peer trainers or tutors, for example, in academic enhancement activities. Peer trainers, tutors, coaches, and helpers are used in a variety of contexts. When youth are well-prepared and properly supervised, such models yield benefits for both trainers and participants.

Proposals would be expected to describe strategies that would be adopted to ensure adequate training, supervision, and professional development for all staff, especially younger, less educated and less experienced staff members and interns.

Qualifications for program directors. The Beacon program director is a full-time position. It is anticipated that the RFP would require all program directors to have at least an associate's degree plus three years experience working in a youth-serving program of comparable size or six years experience working in a youth-serving organization of comparable size, two years of which were spent in a supervisory position.

Qualifications for staff providing educational services for middle school youth. It is anticipated that the RFP would require all staff providing educational services to middle school youth to have, at a minimum, some post-secondary education. Program designs proposing to use certified teachers to provide educational services for middle school youth would receive greater consideration.

It is anticipated that DYCD would allow "blackout days" for staff training and professional development.

### *Co-locators*

DYCD encourages collaborations with unpaid co-locators to support or enhance Beacon programming. It is anticipated that the RFP would require proposals to clearly delineate and justify the role that co-locators would play in the overall program design. This would include activities to be undertaken by the co-locator and how they relate to the core program. The proposal would also describe the administrative arrangements that would govern the relationship between the Beacon, its co-locators, and any other community-based organizations operating programs at the host school.

Proposals would be expected to demonstrate that all program activities benefit Beacon participants or serve a community-building purpose that addresses community needs.

Contractors would also be responsible for ensuring that co-located services adhere to the Beacon model, including youth development principles and goals.

Beacon relationships with co-locators vary and provide an assortment of benefits. For some non-profit organizations, Beacons' free space and pool of participants are a significant draw: for example, a basketball league seeking recruits and access to a gym. Beacons may also collaborate with co-locators to procure services for specific groups of participants: for example, a circus skills or leadership skills program for middle school students. In contrast, in their role as community-builders, Beacon may agree to let co-locators use space primarily or exclusively for the benefit of people who do not participate in Beacon activities: for example, a theater group that needs rehearsal space. Finally, multi-service organizations operating Beacons may choose to locate *non-DYCD-funded* programs at Beacon sites for the benefit of Beacon participants and others. In the case of co-located programs *funded by DYCD*, the participants will not count towards Beacon minimum service levels.

#### *Sub-contractors*

It is anticipated that the RFP will allow up to 30 percent of DYCD Beacon funding to be spent on services provided by sub-contractors or consultants, excluding additional funding awarded for a Beacon Literacy program (see below for details relating to Beacon Literacy Programs.) However, the contractor would not be permitted to subcontract any of the Beacon director's responsibilities for oversight and management of the Beacon site, and would be responsible for ensuring that all the services provided by its sub-contractors adhere to the Beacon model, including youth development principles and goals.

#### *Linkage Agreements*

To serve as effective community centers, Beacons will be expected to demonstrate collaboration with relevant community stakeholders. In certain cases, formal linkages will be required: for example, with host schools, local police precincts, and local substance abuse treatment providers. Beacons will also be encouraged to form relationships with New York City agencies such as the Department of Parks and Recreation, Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Probation, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the New York City Housing Authority.

#### Community/School Partnership Agreement

It is anticipated that, as in the past, proposers will be required to submit a signed Community/School Partnership Agreement in a form prescribed by DYCD prior to completion of contract negotiations. A model of this Agreement setting out the joint responsibilities of the school and the Beacon will be appended to the RFP.

### **III. Beacon Literacy Program Option**

It is anticipated that the RFP will include an option for integrated literacy programs for a limited number of successful Beacon proposers. Beacon Literacy Programs would serve youth 16 years and older who are neither enrolled in high school nor required to be enrolled in any form of education and lack sufficient mastery of basic educational skills or are unable to speak, read, or write the English language well enough to participate in education or training programs conducted in English.

The aim of these programs would be to target individuals functioning at the Adult Basic Education (ABE) 0-5.9 reading level, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Levels, I, II, and III, and those who are without full-time employment or underemployed. Beacon Literacy Programs would provide a minimum of 150 hours of classroom instruction per student annually. Minimum staff qualifications would be bachelor's degrees and appropriate training and experience serving adult populations.

To be eligible for a combined Beacon-Literacy Program contract, a provider would have to achieve satisfactory scores in both the Beacon and the Beacon Literacy Program competitions. Proposers would submit a separate proposal for the Beacon Literacy Program. Proposers may sub-contract out the Beacon Literacy Program services in their entirety.

### **IV. Administration for Children's Services Foster Care Prevention Program Option**

Currently, sixteen Beacon programs have an Administration for Children's Services (ACS) Foster Care Prevention Programs. It is anticipated that these sites will continue to offer ACS Foster Care Prevention Programs. Contractors at such sites will be required to develop and maintain a program in accordance with applicable ACS and New York State regulations.

To be eligible for a combined Beacon-ACS contract, a provider would have to achieve satisfactory scores in both the (stand-alone) Beacon and ACS Foster Care Prevention Program competitions.

### **V. Funding levels and Anticipated Number of Contracts**

It is anticipated that funding for individual Beacon programs will be \$400,000 per program, excluding opening fees. It is also anticipated that the RFP would require successful contractors to provide a 15 percent match, all of which would be used to enhance programming for middle school youth.

Funding for up to 80 Beacon programs beginning July 1, 2007 is expected to be up to \$32 million, excluding opening fees.

It is anticipated that additional funding for up to 20 Beacon Literacy Programs beginning July 1, 2007 would be \$2.1 million.

It is anticipated that funding for 16 ACS Beacons beginning July 1, 2007 would be \$7.7 million.

## **VI. Hours of Operation and Minimum Service Levels (excluding Literacy and ACS Options)**

It is anticipated that the RFP will require Beacon programs to operate for a minimum of 42 hours per week over 6 days, in the afternoons and evenings, on weekends, during school holidays and vacation periods, and during the summer. Programs would be allowed “black out” days for staff training and professional development.

### *Minimum service levels*

Overall minimum target: It is anticipated that the RFP would require contractors to serve a minimum of 1,200 individuals (including 200 adults) overall. It is also anticipated that services to these individuals would further comply with the following minimum service levels.

Structured activities middle school students: Contractors would serve a minimum of 300 sixth to eighth grade students.

To count towards the minimum service level, each participant would have contact with the program for a minimum of 288 hours per year. Middle school students participating in co-located programs that are also funded by DYCD would *not* count towards the program’s minimum target of 300 middle school youth.

Greater consideration would be given to proposals for programs that are designed to serve more than 300 middle school youth or to provide additional services that address middle school students’ mental health and other special needs.

Drop-in activities: Contractors would provide drop-in activities, such as open gym, welcome rooms, teen clubs, and computer/games rooms, for a minimum of 300 individuals, including youth and young adults.

Community events: Contractors would provide community events and activities for a minimum of 500 people (all ages). These would include fairs, cultural/theme events, outings, and performances.

Other programming for youth and adults: Aside from structured activities for middle school students, there will be no minimum service levels for programming provided on a regular basis to youth and adults. It is anticipated that the RFP would allow such activities (for example, health/fitness or computer classes) based on demonstrated need.

Other programming for children in elementary grades: There will be no required minimum service levels for elementary-age children, but it is anticipated that the RFP would allow activities for this age group that are provided on a regular basis, for example, homework help and summer camp, based on demonstrated need. (These programs would be required to operate in compliance with applicable City and State regulations.)

## **VII. Tracking and Reporting**

It is anticipated that the RFP would require contractors to track enrollment and/or attendance for all activities they provide, to demonstrate compliance with required minimum service levels, or need/demand in those cases where there are no minimum targets. DYCD plans to introduce an electronic data-reporting system to enable the required data to be logged without undue burdens being imposed on contractors. DYCD would provide training on the new reporting system.

Subject to the results of its pilot outcomes study, it is anticipated that DYCD would introduce a new system requiring contractors to report in detail on middle school youth who receive structured programming for the specified minimum of 288 hours per year. It is anticipated that the new system would be designed to track participant attendance and youth development outcomes.

It is anticipated that the RFP would require contractors who operate the Literacy Beacon programs to collect and report on participant data related to the federal core indicators and the outcome measures of the National Reporting System: for example, improvements in literacy skill levels, placement and retention in, or completion of postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment, or career advancement, and receipt of a high school diploma or equivalent. Similarly, it is anticipated that contractors operating ACS Beacon programs would be required to collect and monitor data as specified by ACS, including data to assess critical service activities and ensure that the stated goals of the child welfare system are being effectively met.

## **VIII. Planned Method for Proposal Evaluation**

Proposals will be evaluated pursuant to evaluation criteria set out in the RFP. These will include the quality and quantity of successful relevant experience, demonstrated level of organizational capability, and quality of proposed program approach and design.

## **IX. Procurement Timeline and Proposed Term of Contract**

It is anticipated that DYCD will release an RFP for this procurement by the end of November 2006. The proposal submission deadline will be approximately six weeks from

the release of the RFP. DYCD anticipates entering into three year contracts for programs to begin July 1, 2007.

**Comments**

Please provide written comments to DYCD at the following address post dated no later than October 16, 2006 to:

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Comments may also be emailed to [beaconcp@dycd.nyc.gov](mailto:beaconcp@dycd.nyc.gov)