

America's Promise: A Catalyst for Youth Issues

Donald Floyd and Richard Sauer

The leaders and youth workers of this country's long-standing youth development programs were ambivalent about the creation of America's Promise. While we championed this added attention to the needs of youth and their often-unrealized potential asset to communities, we wondered why there was not just additional support sought for the existing and undeniably successful youth programs. After all, the Five Promises essentially describe the roles and goals of many existing programs and organizations, all of which barely reach 60% of this nation's young people. Why not invest resources in these programs to reach the other 40%, including more unserved and underserved youth?

At the same time, we saw a huge opportunity to provide attention and positive opportunities for youth involvement and development. General Colin Powell, a man with enormous public recognition and credibility, became chairman of the board of directors and the perceived national leader of America's Promise. This created the opportunity to elevate youth needs and programs on the national agenda. Given the potential benefits—new financial resources, expanded volunteer recruitment, and nationwide community-based attention and commitment to the engagement of youth in addressing local issues—youth program leaders committed their support to America's Promise.

America's Promise set out to coordinate the nation's response to the Five Promises by creat-

ing a diverse alliance of national organizations (including the 4-H Youth Development Program) called Partners. Partners make large-scale national commitments to fulfill one or more of the Five Promises. These organizations agree to expand existing youth programs or create new ones and hold themselves accountable by measuring their progress. The groups span all sectors of society including corporations, not-for-profits, higher education and faith-based groups, associations and federal agencies, and arts and culture organizations. Most partners expand the scale or impact of their efforts by collaborating with other groups, such as direct youth service providers.

America's Promise does not have its own staff of community-based youth workers. It is a national organization focused on increasing awareness, motivating communities to action, and stimulating corporations to make resource commitments to local programs. America's Promise tries to match new corporate and other partner resource commitments with the youth-serving commitments of youth organizations that are local direct-service providers. These youth organizations then work to achieve the expanded goals—they provide the arms and legs with which to carry out the Five Promises.

The 4-H Youth Development Program nationwide made a commitment to Promise Five—giving back through community service—by involving 300,000 young people in direct community service from 1997 to 2000. National

4-H Council and the United States Department of Agriculture worked with state 4-H program leaders to tabulate the local commitments into this cumulative national goal. While doing so, it became obvious that 4-H youth were already heavily involved in community service. Nevertheless, the new attention improved our documentation, and a new category for “community service” was added to the national 4-H enrollment reporting system. Coupled with an effort led by National 4-H Council to involve youth as partners with adults in identifying and solving local issues and problems, many youth workers and organizations now perceive 4-H as an exemplar of youth serving their communities in very significant ways.

Youth Organizations Express Concern

America's Promise was created to exist long enough to build the national coordinated response to the Five Promises. However, with the recent creation of its own 501(c)(3) organization, it became clear that America's Promise was striving for permanence; it now depends on public and private grants and contributions to sustain that existence, just like any other nonprofit organization, and in that sense competes with the other youth organizations. At the same time the major youth organizations were not receiving directly any of the new resource commitments generated by America's Promise. Youth organization leaders expressed concern that America's Promise was taking the credit for the expanded efforts of the youth organizations without providing any of the newly raised resources to fund these expansions. This resulted in some open and direct meetings with the leaders of America's Promise.

After expressing their concerns, the youth organizations stayed on board, despite these challenges and the cynicism among other youth organizations. This was largely because of the huge potential for new public and private resources with Colin Powell as the national spokesman for America's Promise and this nation's young people. This potential suggests a new level of total resources that would more than offset any “competition” from America's Promise. With Colin Powell becoming Secretary of State, these questions may resurface. (Marc Racicot, former Governor of Montana, is the new Chair and Colin Powell's wife, Alma, was elected Vice-Chair.)

Opening Doors

What difference has America's Promise made?

It has awarded a modest amount in grants. The CFO of America's Promise verified that \$687,400 in grants were given out in FY2000 and so far this year. All of the grants went to local units, most to local Communities of Promise, and (with one exception) ranged from \$10,000 to \$30,000. While none of the grants went to national youth organizations, one did go to a local Council of Camp Fire Boys and Girls. Perhaps local 4-H units will compete for some of these funds as they become more active in existing Communities of Promise and in establishing new ones. Several state 4-H offices are working to fulfill a USDA commitment to create 50 new Communities of Promise. Regardless,



Photo by Don Breneman

America's Promise became highly visible under the leadership of retired General Colin Powell.

the real potential benefit to all youth organizations from the work of America's Promise is the increased visibility given to the critical need for nonformal youth development programs.

It may be difficult to document, but we believe much of the increased focus on youth and positive youth development over the past four years can be attributed to the visibility, energy, and funding America's Promise brought to youth work. General Powell opened doors to corporate leaders, major foundations, and the media. Whereas youth organizations once saw this huge upstart as a threat, today we have youth organizations and agencies working together more than ever before.

The Younger Americans Act and the National Youth Summit are examples of success that would not have been possible to the same degree without America's Promise. The work to draft the Younger Americans Act (YAA) and have it introduced succeeded because General Powell and America's Promise made timely contacts and brought political leaders on board. Also, the National Collaboration for Youth and its then executive director, Gordon Raley, played a key developmental and coordinating role; we feel the effectiveness of the National Collaboration was enhanced through the work of America's Promise. Work started in the fall of 1999, modeling the YAA after the Older

America's Promise Funds to Not-for-Profits/Communities of Promise

Organization Funded	Fiscal Agent	Amount Granted
Finger Lakes' Promise	Finger Lakes Regional Health System	\$10,800
Fulton County's Promise	Fulton County Regional Chamber of Commerce & Industry	\$10,800
Otsego's Promise/Leatherstocking Promise for Youth	Leatherstocking Education on Alcoholism/Addictions Foundation	\$10,800
Cleveland's Promise	United Way of Greater Cleveland	\$20,000
Kansas City's Promise	Kansas City's Promise	\$20,000
Knoxville's Promise	Knoxville's Promise	\$20,000
San Diego's Promise	The Children's Initiative	\$20,000
Twin Cities' Promise for Youth	Twin Cities' Promise for Youth	\$20,000
Anacostia	Unknown	\$25,000
Atlanta's Promise	United Way of Metro Atlanta	\$25,000
Birmingham Area Alliance for Youth	United Way of Central Alabama	\$25,000
Dallas' Promise	Lone Star Council of Camp Fire Boys & Girls	\$25,000
Garrett's Promise	Garrett County Partnership for Children & Families	\$25,000
Norman's Promise	Center for Children & Families	\$25,000
Philadelphia's Promise	United Way of SEPA	\$25,000
Sioux Falls' Promise	Sioux Falls' Promise	\$25,000
South Hampton Roads' Promise	Volunteer Hampton Roads	\$25,000
Spokane's Promise	Heath Improvement Partnership	\$25,000
West Orange's Promise	PLACE for Kids	\$25,000
East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership	East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership	\$30,000
Houston's Promise	Volunteer Houston	\$250,000
	Total	\$687,400

(Information provided by America's Promise for fiscal year 2000 and fiscal year 2001 up to May 2001.)

Leaders of major youth organization were concerned that America's Promise funds were not going directly to their programs. As this chart shows, most grants went to local Communities of Promise. Youth organizations (like local 4-H units) may receive more funds as they become more active in Communities of Promise.

Americans Act. On January 3, 2001, YAA was introduced into the 107th Congress as H.R. 17.

In the second example, leaders of America's Promise did not initially respond well to the voices of young people attending the 1997 President's Summit. These young leaders called for an expanded role in identifying and responding to youth issues. Persistent efforts early on to turn up the volume on these youth concerns—by National 4-H Council, the National Youth Leadership Council, The Points of Light Foundation, and the Corporation for National Service, among others—kept the concerns visible. In June of 2000, America's Promise joined The Points of Light Foundation and the Corporation for National Service to lead the very successful National Youth Summit in Orlando. In March 2001, America's Promise President Peter Gallagher announced “the creation of a Youth Partnership team—a group of 10–15 young people (14–22-years-old with one-third coming from the D.C. metro area)—who will inform our work and lead our key initiatives. Serving as a sounding board and leadership team with America's Promise staff . . . they will serve on one of four teams which will work closely with a division of America's Promise and will select members to serve on the National Advisory and Board of Directors of America's Promise.” He said, “At the heart of the America's Promise movement is the tenet that young people are resources and leaders—part of the solution, not the problem. We are also pressing forward on other fronts as part of our commitment to engage the talents, energies, and idealism of young people in this crusade. We have hired a new national director of youth service and leadership initiatives to manage the Youth Partnership Team, revitalize the Youth Service Alliance, and forge new partnerships to build the corps of young people fulfilling the Five Promises for other children and youth.”

Capitalizing on Visibility

We have seen the advantages and benefits of this very visible and well-funded partner serving as a catalyst for youth issues. The support of and commitment to America's Promise from most major youth organizations is strong, with optimism about the future. This optimism includes continuing increased awareness of the needs of youth and the role nonformal youth development organizations can play in meeting those needs. It also includes hope for an expanded national, state, and local resource commitment to support proven youth organizations in expanding their reach to and impact on young people.

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— Peter Gallagher, America's Promise President

4-H can continue to benefit from the work of America's Promise by capitalizing on the visibility given to young people and the critical community assets for positive youth development. We can:

- show what 4-H youth and volunteers are doing in communities across the country;
- portray 4-H as a label-free zone for all youth and families, thereby increasing its diversity, community impact, and value;
- use this visibility and success to make a strong case for additional public and private resources; and
- build our collaborations and partnerships with other youth organizations and agencies so that no young person fails to have access to resources needed to become a competent, coping, and caring adult.