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## Oakland County Youth Assistance A National Model for the Prevention of Delinquency, Neglect, and Abuse

*Celebrating 50 Years of Strengthening Families  
1953-2003*

Oakland County Youth Assistance began in Hazel Park, Michigan in 1953. Over the next 20 years, it expanded throughout the county and now encompasses 26 local affiliates.

### **The Youth Assistance Mission**

**“To strengthen youth and families and reduce the incidence of delinquency, neglect, and abuse through community involvement.”**

One unique feature of Youth Assistance and a key to its stability over time is its **tri-sponsorship**. The **Probate Court/Circuit Court-Family Division** is one sponsoring group. The local **school districts** make up the second group of partners, and the **municipalities** (cities, villages and townships) are the third. Each local YA program is co-sponsored by the courts, the school district it encompasses, and the municipalities therein. In all, over 80 branches of government and school districts sponsor and support YA. The Courts provide the staffing for each local Youth Assistance program. The other local sponsors provide the office, and necessary clerical support, to operate the counseling and community organizing components of the program.

The approach used to address our Mission Statement is **two-pronged**. The first includes providing direct, **family-focused, free, confidential, accessible, and timely casework services to youth and families** in the community. Referrals to the program come primarily from the police (34%), the schools (51%), and parents themselves (10%). Any youth from 0-17 years of age who lives in Oakland County can be referred for services. **Each year over 3,000 referrals are received**. About 60% of those referred are males, and the average age is about 12.7. Referrals can be for such things as incorrigibility, truancy, retail fraud, larceny, assault, alcohol or other drug offenses, etc. Referrals can also be for situations where no illegal act has occurred but where changes in a child’s attitude or behavior are noted, perhaps withdrawing from peers due to a pending divorce. In each case, a family-assessment is conducted, that in addition to focusing on the particular incident identifies the needs and strengths of all members of the family. Based on the assessment, a casework plan is developed with the family that may contain specific actions for the parents, each sibling as well as the referred youth. Sometimes the family or individual members of the family are referred out to other community resources for services. There are no preset time limits, or number of visits. Typically, services last 3-6 months.

The second approach used by Youth Assistance, **Community Organization**, is key to keeping our program vibrant and **responsive to the needs of each community**. In each local YA area, individuals who live and/or work in the community come together to form a working Board of Directors. In some communities this Board is made up of less than a dozen individuals. In other communities, as many as 50 people serve on the Board or its subcommittees. These Boards are responsible for identifying issues in their communities that contribute to delinquency, abuse, and neglect. They must then identify existing community resources that may already be or potentially could be addressing these identified issues. Finally, they **develop programs** to meet unmet needs. All of this is often done in collaboration with others in the communities including schools, service clubs, the faith community, and businesses. While each community is unique, there are some commonalities. In every community there are parents who need to improve their parenting skills. There are youth who need mentors, recreation, skill and self-esteem building opportunities. And, there is a need to recognize youth for doing positive things for their communities.

Annually, over **1,000 volunteers** participate in some capacity, as a member of their local Board, on a subcommittee or by performing specific tasks like driving kids to and from camp, or helping with fundraising. Many of our volunteers are school personnel or work for the municipalities who co-sponsor their local YA program. Other volunteers include members of the faith community, senior citizens, homemakers, business leaders, and youth. If someone wants to make a contribution of their time and talents, we have a job for them to do.