

YALSA Board of Directors – February 08
Topic: White Paper Final Drafts

“Why Have a YA Librarian?”

The Young Adult Library Services Association adopted a new strategic plan in 2004. That plan included a Core Purpose and a Vivid Description of the Desired Future. The Core Purpose is “to advocate for excellence in library services to the teen population”. The first bullet below the description states: “There will be a young adult librarian in every public and secondary school library”. The group of practitioners who developed both of these statements understood that they go hand in hand. Teenagers need to build trusting relationships before they are willing to engage in activities. The only way to build these relationships and provide quality library service to teens is to have a dedicated young adult librarian in each location that serves them.

The Search Institute, www.search-institute.org, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to advance the well being of adolescents and children has determined that healthy communities are built through healthy youth. This vision is based on extensive research on youth, which has produced a “developmental assets” framework. The 40 developmental assets are the factors which are critical to a young person’s successful growth and development. There are a number of these assets that libraries can help youth attain. The most important are that youth develop other adult relationships, that the young person receives support from non parent adults, that young people read for pleasure at least three or more hours per week, and that young people complete at least one hour of homework every school day. Despite the understanding that successful, well-prepared young adults are essential to fill roles as contributing members of a vital society; funding and resources to reach this goal are far less than what is needed to make it a reality.

Communities often do not provide after school or weekend activities for youth. It has been proven that the most dangerous time of day for young people is 3-8 pm. The After School Alliance reports that 14.3 million kindergartners through 12th graders take care of themselves after school everyday. These youth have very few positive choict 14.. 0. on extt6(u)1(u6-17.60t:3l less(ey are w

more than 99% now. An assumption might be made that these older young adults experienced quality library service as teenagers.

All of these facts indicate the importance of creating positions for Young Adult librarians. The Chapin Hall Center for Children, www.chapinhall.org, completed a study in 2004 on Teens in the Library. This study examined key findings from the evaluation of “Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development, a Wallace Foundation Initiative”. Public Libraries selected for this program were challenged to “develop or expand youth programs that engaged individual teens in a developmentally supportive manner while enhancing library services for all youth in the community”. Based on the experiences of the PLPYD sites the findings concluded that: “Public Libraries have the potential to design youth programs that provide developmentally enriching experiences to teens and have positive effect both on youth services and the library more broadly.” In the area of staffing, the first recommendation for improving youth services in libraries is that “dedicated staff are essential to effective youth programs”. Across all of the sites senior administrators and librarians agreed “that youth programs require a staff person whose priority is to manage the program...”

Library administrators need to understand the importance of hiring qualified young adult librarians. Even with all of the evidence available, the data collected for the PLDS Statistical Report 2007 finds that in public libraries with populations over one million, the mean or average number of young adult library professionals or paraprofessionals is 37. This number drops to 11 for libraries with populations from 500,00 to 999,999 and to 2 for libraries with populations of 100,000-249,000. Many public library systems in the United States still do not have one young adult librarian on staff. When it comes to collection development the average percent of funding for YA materials ranges from a high of 5.2% to a low of 3.6% yet the percent of the teen population is generally double or triple the percentage spent on materials.

Young Adult librarians are age level specialists who create programming and build collections appropriate to the needs of young adults and develop services based on knowledge of adolescent development. They have a passion for young adult literature and keep up with current teen trends in reading, music and technology. They provide reference service to help young adults find and use information and they promote activities that build and strengthen information literacy skills. They believe in youth participation and know it is essential to provide excellent service to teens. They recruit teens to participate in activities such as teen advisory groups and encourage teens to volunteer and work in libraries. They also work with youth development experts in the community and collaborate with agencies that provide services to teenagers.

Why a Young Adult librarian? The obvious reasons are listed above. On a fundamental level the goal is to provide excellent service to teenagers. On a more global plane there are many other important reasons. Young Adult librarians build relationships with teens and help other staff become comfortable with them. Studies have proven that teens are coming into libraries in record numbers. Many libraries are experiencing behavioral problems because there is no one on staff who understands teen behavior or knows how to harness their energy into positive activities. One of the findings from the Chapin Hall study indicated that staff prejudices broke down when they develop relationships with teenagers. Youth development principles were

credited with changing the general culture of the library by providing an “important new language” for library administrators that helped the library establish a new leadership role in the community. In an era when libraries must clearly articulate their importance to the larger community, these collaborative efforts increase our value as an institution and also make good economic sense for the community.

Why a Young Adult librarian? Because they are essential to providing the best service to young adults in libraries and they are essential to keeping libraries viable and up to date. They are creating the next generation of tax paying library users; this is validated by the new Pew study. So the answer is simple – it is the right and the smart thing to do.

Audra Caplan, Director
Harford County Public Library