Harford County, Maryland

A State Action Plan Ignites Local Changes

See how a state action plan created with Ready by 21 strategies spurred a rural county to create new goals for its young people.

Cover of the Harford Ready by 21 Action Plan

You see it all the time: ambitious "action plans" issued by state and federal agencies that attract lots of attention at their unveilings, then lots of dust on their shelves. Not so in Maryland, where a state plan is stirring local change.

In Harford County, for example, leaders used a state plan to find out more than ever about their young people, and to craft an ambitious blueprint of their own to fill previously unseen gaps, overcome barriers and build on strengths.

Harford's experience shows that leaders don't need a crisis to take action. By most measures, its kids were doing well. Then in March 2010 came the statewide rollout of the Maryland Ready by 21 Action Plan, created by a collaboration of state leaders who used Ready by 21 strategies to forge new ways of providing services and supports to youth. The plan spells out objectives and benchmarks to be reached through 53 action steps that cover education, employment, health and housing. For example: Align public school instruction with defined 21st century workplace skills, and map out providers of free or low-cost insurance for specific groups of youth.

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Harford (population: 244,826) is one of several counties using the plan to drive change.
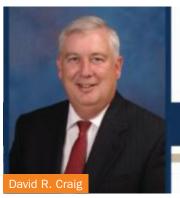
Getting to Work

To get started, the Harford County Local Management Board – composed of all county agencies that serve children and youth (learn more here) – created a Harford Ready by 21 Task Force. Its 87 members came from 44 organizations – including government, business, education, community service and faith-based – along with youth and families.

The task force embarked on a six-month process (starting in fall 2010) of gathering and centralizing information about young people and the opportunities available to them through data collection and community meetings. The task force compared the county's efforts to the goals and action steps in the state plan.

The state agenda "created a structure," said Sharon Lipford, deputy director of the Harford County Department of Community Services. "The county then used that structure … to help meet the goals of the state. We work closely with the governor's local office to make sure we're aligned."

Ready by 21 Case Study

David R. Craig

Elizabeth S. Hendrix

The project confirmed that in many ways, Harford County is ahead: It exceeds state and national averages on such metrics as school attendance, high school graduation and youth employment. But a small group of students were missing a huge number of school days, and the dropout rate at an alternative education high school was five times the county's overall rate.

Development doesn't stop when the school bell rings.

Beyond school, not only did many kids think there was a shortage of out-of-school time activities (common in rural areas), but too many of them didn't know what was already available. At the same time, youth alcohol and drug abuse rates were far higher than the state averages. And the libraries were seeing "a large number" of homeless, transition-aged youth.

The Plan
Last year, the county issued its own action plan – an excellent example of how a community can pull together data to tell a compelling, big-picture story across agencies and outcomes. The plan reviews the county's strengths, where it needs to improve, the barriers to progress and ideas to move forward.

The plan lays out two types of actions: those that implement each item in the state plan, such as creating partnerships for high schoolers to visit college campuses and to earn college credits, and connecting youth from summer employment programs with year-round employment opportunities; and those that address specific needs in the county. Among the latter:

- Develop a better communication plan between the community college and public schools about the variety of opportunities that both have available.
- Use "system navigators" to support homeless youth.
- Also use such navigators to help families access medical assistance.
- Develop creative employment situations and ways for service providers of youth with disabilities to approach employers.

Turning the Plan into Action
While implementation is in the early stages, County Executive David R. Craig says the work to create the plan led to better sharing of information, "new partnerships and enhanced programming."

Since completing the action plan, Harford has launched several community and youth engagement initiatives. They include a website for and by local youth (www.harfordyouth.org) and community-wide expos to bring providers into school settings.

It appears that no dust will settle on this plan. By involving the entire community and the full range of youth outcomes, it embraces a critical concept summarized by Craig: "Development doesn't stop when the school bell rings."

| March 2012

For more information, visit www.readyby21.org