



Creating A New Future for Little Rock's Children, Youth, and Families

Little Rock's First Master Plan for Children, Youth, and Families

Who:

City of Little Rock Department of Community Planning

What:

Creation of a Master Plan for Children, Youth, and Families

When:

2014–present

How:

ACS facilitated an advisory group, guided strategy and process, conducted research, and engaged the community to create a comprehensive master plan.

Result:

The city now has a plan to address unmet needs and challenges that are preventing the City's children, youth, and families from leading sustainable and thriving lives.

Supporting children, youth and families is never a done deal—and plans that worked well 20 years ago don't fare so well in today's world. That's what city leaders in Little Rock, Arkansas realized in 2015, when their system for supporting prevention, intervention and treatment programs for youth, created in 1994, wasn't holding up so well in the face of the stresses and demands on young people and families in a 21st century world. To reassess their current reality and reinvigorate their approach to serving children, youth and families, Little Rock needed the help of a firm with expertise in community engagement and strategy development, but also was extremely knowledgeable about the needs of families and the possibilities for youth, in particular within communities of color.

Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) was the perfect choice. In 2015, the firm began to work with the City of Little Rock Department of Community Planning to create the first-ever [Master Plan for Children, Youth, and Families](#).

The City knew that ACS could apply extensive research and knowledge of promising practices from across the country. ACS also had a reputation for skill in drawing out local voices, wisdom and know-how to inform the creation of a highly relevant and resonant plan. And, because of ACS's [commitment and focus](#), Little Rock leaders knew that the plan would ultimately ensure that all children and youth in Little Rock would have the opportunity to succeed, thrive and lead sustainable lives. ACS partnered with the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and Philander Smith College's Social Justice Institute to round out the consultant team.

Building on Past Success

ACS immediately recognized that Little Rock had a solid foundation upon which to build its new Master Plan. The city had begun actively investing in youth in 1994, when residents approved a special sales tax specifically to help support youth-related programs. This funding supported a positive youth development framework that



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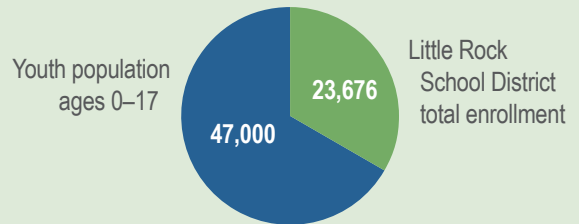
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emphasized children and youth as assets to community—a groundbreaking approach back then. The City prioritized programs that provided prevention, intervention, and treatment, and they created the new Commission for Children, Youth, and Families (CCYF) to help guide and support those programs and services. CCYF also oversaw the new sales-tax-funded revenue stream, which over 22 years supported prevention programs to steer young adults away from crime and gang violence, intervention programs that redirect children and youth away from criminal or delinquent activities, and treatment services such as behavioral health, grief counseling, trauma services, and addiction treatment.

Key Statistics About Little Rock Youth

The city's total youth population ages 0–17 is approximately **47,000**.



The Little Rock School District has a total enrollment of **23,676**.

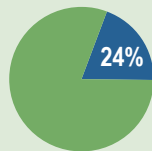
In areas of Little Rock with high poverty rates (above 40%) **between one in five and one in three young adults have not completed high school.**



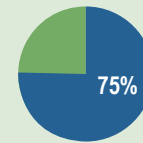
More than **2,000 arrests were made in schools in years 2010–2012.**

Most juvenile arrests occur between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., and most were on or around school grounds.

More than **24 percent¹ of Pulaski County's children lack access at times to enough food for an active, healthy life.**



In 2014, **75% of Little Rock's students received free or reduced price lunch.**



There were 341 homeless youth in **Little Rock School District** at the start of the 2014 school year.

Out-of-school suspensions in the Little Rock School District have slightly increased in the last five years. **Nearly 9,000 students received suspensions in the 2013–2014 school year.**

¹Youth data collected was from the Little Rock School District, New Futures for Youth, Little Rock Police Department, Department of Community Programs, and U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Local Areas Unemployment Statistics, Feeding America, Arkansas Department of Education, Arkansas Department of Health, and Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families.

Over time, demographics changed, as did the needs of children, youth, and families. Programs came and went, and City leadership realized it was time to re-evaluate how the programs it funded were meeting the evolving needs of the Little Rock community.

“We chose ACS not only because of their experience in facilitating civic planning processes around the country, but also because we knew they would make sure this plan was *ours*, that it would not be an off-the-shelf product,” says Bruce Moore, City Manager.

Specifically, the City and CCYF wanted a plan to hone their investment in children and youth to achieve three targeted, specific, positive outcomes:

1. to enhance youth’s skills and abilities;
 2. increase graduation rates and academic proficiency; and
 3. reduce youth crime, school suspensions, and youth violence—
- and it does!

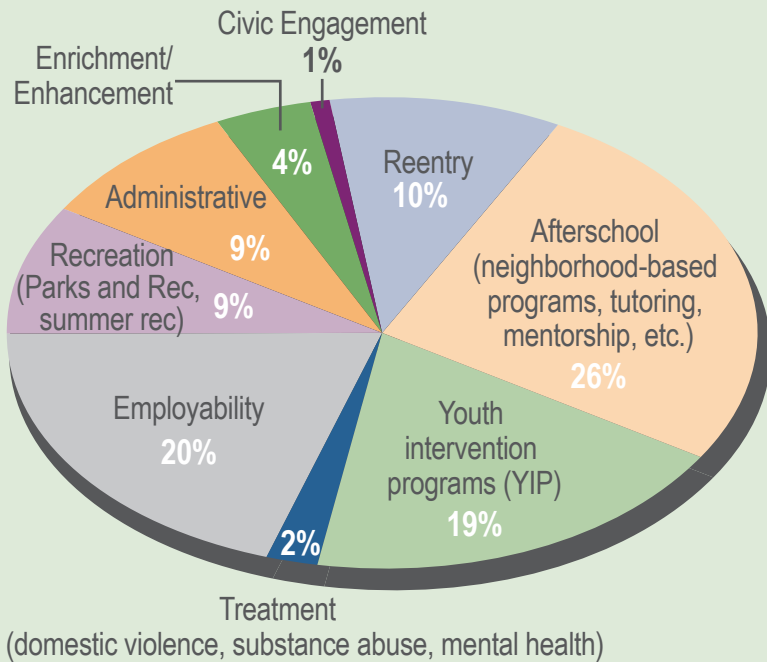
Authentic Engagement for the Little Rock Community

With more than a decade of customized community-based planning experience, ACS knew that if the Little Rock Master Plan was to be successful, it must directly engage the children, youth, and families it was meant to serve. Community members must play a role in the creation of the new Master Plan—and the Master Plan itself must include multiple ways for children, youth, and families to have an ongoing voice and input with respect to the programs that serve them.

ACS also helped CCYF make the case to the rest of Little Rock that supporting the city’s young people could never be the responsibility of a single organization.

The present challenges of today’s world are too complex for any one organization or city department to address alone. Throughout the planning process and within the plan itself, ACS helped CCYF and City leadership drive home the understanding that successfully serving children, youth, and families means developing and maintaining strong partnerships with a wide range of local, state, and national organizations.

General 2015 funding allocations by program category²



²Little Rock Department of Community Programs, 2015

A Purposeful Process for Creating a New Vision

A purposeful planning process that is informed by community residents and data, and backed up by national promising practices, ensures that community-wide plans will be adopted and successfully implemented. ACS used its [expertise](#) in [strategy development](#), [facilitation](#), and [capacity building](#) to design a comprehensive, inclusive planning process for

Planning Process

A three-year Master Plan for children, youth, and families through 2019 and beyond



Focus
all of Little Rock's children and youth can attain skills that will lead to a thriving, sustainable quality of life.

“It quickly became clear to us how valuable the research portion of this work really was,” says Jo Thompson, Chair of CCYF. “The authentic community outreach ACS conducted allowed us to hear directly from the children, youth, and families we’re trying to help. Having a knowledgeable and thoughtful ‘outside’ partner like ACS ensured that the input we received was candid and that we got a true picture of the needs and challenges our residents face. That, combined with the national promising practices, helped us understand of what was possible, rather than simply basing our plans on group guesswork or assumptions.”

Little Rock. That process was rooted in ACS' proprietary framework that leverages local expertise with national best practices.

ACS convened a 10-person advisory committee, made up of community leaders representing a broad spectrum of prevention, intervention, and treatment approaches essential to serving children, youth, and families. ACS helped the advisory committee establish a common vision by engaging hundreds of community members and youth, leveraging local data about Little Rock's youth and scanning the country for promising practices that could broaden the City's horizons.

The new vision was inspiring: *in three years, the City's children and youth will move beyond their current circumstances, will be valued, and will be prepared for their next steps in school, work, and life.* ACS then helped the advisory committee present that vision for feedback and buy-in to CCYF and to City leadership. ACS engaged City Board of Directors in an ongoing way throughout the process to keep them well informed, incorporate their feedback, and create buy-in.

Leveraging Local Knowledge

Once Little Rock's common vision for children, youth, and families was established, ACS and the consulting team continued its aggressive community engagement, working the advisory committee to conduct focus groups and surveys that gathered input from 450 youth and 285 adults. They also conducted interviews with 12 community leaders, surveyed all members of CCYF, conducted a scan of current programs operated by the City, and reviewed quantitative data from sources such as the Little Rock School District, Little Rock Police Department, and New Futures

“In addition to candid input about challenges, ACS was also able to give us a clear, objective and encouraging picture of what’s working and identify the partners and networks we need to cultivate to leverage those programs,” adds Dana Dossett, Director of Little Rock’s Department of Community Programs. “We knew exactly where we were and where we needed to go.”

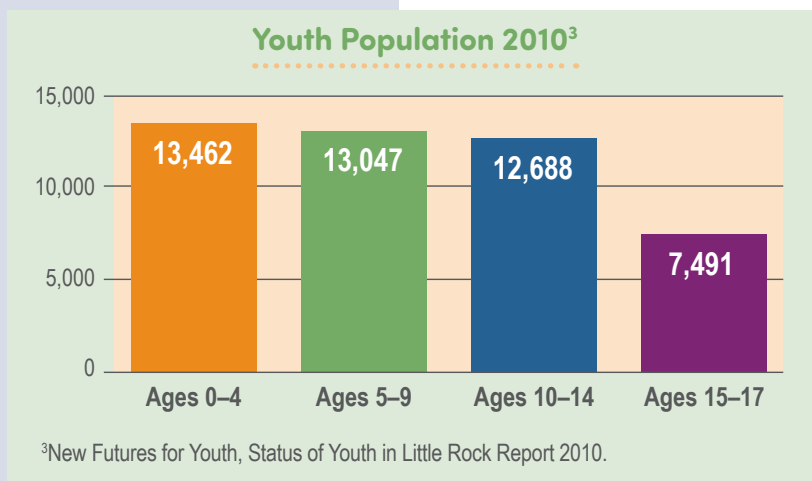
for Youth (a local youth-serving organization). The advisory committee used the local research to inform the planning process and to leverage the assets that already existed in the City as part of a strong foundation for the new plan.

The Master Plan for Children, Youth, and Families

Once its comprehensive research was broadly shared and understood, ACS helped the advisory committee identify the goals, strategies, tactics, rationale, and timelines that make up the Master Plan for Children, Youth, and Families. The plan is robust and was designed for immediate implementation rather than expiring on a shelf—and includes clear benchmarks, standards, and indicators with which CCYF, the City, and the whole community can measure progress and ensure accountability.

While the new Master Plan builds on the successes of the past, it also incorporates some key changes going forward. For example, when fully implemented, the Master Plan will help the City do the following:

- Use data to assess and prioritize needs and move from disparate systems of individually funded providers to a coordinated system of programs and services working together to address common City challenges.
- Use the common vision and related outcomes to guide funding toward increased program quality and enhanced accountability for programs that serve children, youth, and families.
- Increase utilization of services by helping parents and families learn more about available services and supports—as well as how their voices can help those services continually improve.



- Focus on workforce development and build on existing partnerships with the business community to increase opportunities for youth to gain valuable experience and skills.
- Actively engage children and youth in City workforce programming and decision-making.

“ACS not only helped the City of Little Rock create a comprehensive written plan, but also made sure that our plan outlined the infrastructure we need to coordinate and elevate programs according to community needs, and to hold everyone accountable for providing the programs and services that children, youth, and families need and want,” says Bruce Moore. “ACS believes in collaboration, and they provided a collaborative framework that we’re using to expand our partnerships and improve our coordination of services. The City is more aligned around a clear set of outcomes and indicators that we want to work toward together. It’s a great shift—from multiple programs working in relative isolation to a system-wide approach that makes everyone more effective.”

This Plan is a Game-Changer for Children and Youth

When implemented, the Master Plan will fundamentally change the way Little Rock serves children and youth. We’ll build on what’s worked in the past and embrace current best practice to create an aligned, community-wide effort to help our young residents thrive.

Specifically, we will:

Use data

to identify and prioritize services that fulfill the unmet needs of Little Rock children and youth

Increase quality and accountability

through common outcomes, program standards and evaluation

Enhance communication

to and with the community about services and programs

Develop employability skills

so that youth are prepared to work, and Little Rock has a strong future workforce

Place a priority on children and youth

and integrate youth voice in decision-making

Opening Lines of Ongoing Communication

In addition to the development of the plan, ACS provided recommendations for ongoing communication about the planning process to internal and external stakeholders.



“This Master Plan is much more than words on paper,” says Bruce Moore. “The level of outreach that ACS conducted through the planning process to gather input from stakeholders throughout the community means that we now have a large number of people at all levels who are taking ownership of the implementation, and outcome, of this plan. This truly is *our* plan, and we believe in our hearts that it will make a difference for our kids and our community.”



Fast-Forward into Little Rock's Future

Little Rock's Master Plan has provided a clear roadmap for a coordinated, city-wide approach that is relevant to the needs, desires and expectations of its citizens. Since the plan was completed in June 2016, the city already has worked closely with partners and community to make significant strides in implementation. For example:

- The CCYF used data to prioritize and determine the number of services provided in locations across the city in 2017.
- A new communication plan drives outreach to parents and families, and includes a quarterly newsletter with youth-focused, youth-written content.
- The Department of Community Programs continues to work more closely and collaboratively with the Little Rock School District. For example, an administrator at the Little Rock School District is now a member of the CCYF, and the Department of Community Programs is part of the decision-making table for school district-led programs and diversion programs.
- The Department of Community Programs, Arkansas Baptist College, and Little Rock Department of Parks and Recreation are working collaboratively on a new career development initiative that helps individuals ages 18-30 attain a GED or other educational credentials and find a job.
- When youth violence increased in 2016, the Department of Community Programs worked with the Police Department, Little Rock School District, and others to prevent cycles of community violence.
- The City of Little Rock launched a new youth council to engage more young people in decision-making processes.
- The City conducted training to build capacity among service providers to help them meet new standards and requirements for funding. In the past, service providers could simply write a request letter. Now, everyone who receives funding must reflect on which Master Plan outcomes they address, and a newly created Request For Qualification process (specifically recommended by ACS) highlights program design and evaluation to ensure service providers are working toward the common outcomes and adhering to standards in the Master Plan. In addition, service providers are required to maximize resources and coordinate services and opportunities for children and families participating in a city-funded program.

The plan was completed in June 2016 and can be downloaded [here](#) and the full appendix [here](#).



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