Blue Ribbon Commission of Wilmington, NC

The Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) on the Prevention of Youth Violence is a program focused on fostering the wellbeing of the youth and families who are residents of an area in Wilmington, NC known as the Youth Enrichment Zone (YEZ). Approximately 400 families live inside the YEZ. This program based in New Hanover County was created in 2008 to address the growing concerns of youth violence concentrated within the boundaries of the YEZ. The BRC seeks to provide leadership, foster collaboration, and develop resources for addressing youth violence. The BRC’s mission is “Building a community where youth are safe, healthy, educated, and successful...Now!” The BRC is supported by community and faith-based organizations, schools, mental health and human service organizations, political leaders, for-profit companies, and many non-profits whose focus is on the needs of children and families. The underlying strategy of the BRC is not to create additional programs, but rather to build upon existing resources, identify and fill gaps, and bring about better collaboration between agencies to serve children, youth, and families in need.

The BRC has created the YEZ, a project modeled after the successful Harlem Children’s Zone. The goal of the YEZ is to transform the community within the designated area by identifying existing resources and coordinating a continuum of support and services to increase availability of after school, summer enrichment, life-skills, and parenting programs and activities to reduce youth violence. The mission of the BRC is divided into 3 primary goals: increase health and wellness of youth in the YEZ, foster a safe environment where youth can prosper, and support the success of YEZ youth in school.

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Specific programs address the needs of the family, needs of youth, and health via food insecurity. To meet the needs of families, BRC staff conduct home visits and case management, provide space for parents to gather and attend workshops, offer tax preparation assistance, plan family fun days, and promote job opportunities and employment stability through an initiative known as Phoenix Hometown Hires (see Community Story). To meet the needs of youth, there is a teen council, a scholarship program, a revitalized community park with weekly activities, summer programs, and a variety of school-based initiatives to foster important academic and life skills, like healthy relationships. Food insecurity is addressed through farmers’ markets, a backpack program, a school-based community garden, and the distribution of produce boxes.

The BRC has evolved into a program that prioritizes community collaboration, allowing the BRC to connect YEZ residents to community resources community members consider important. This was the original intended aim of the BRC, and this is one of the reasons the HCZ is so successful. The HCZ succeeds because they bring in defined resources to defined neighborhoods. Partnerships represent another key to the initiative’s success. The BRC has a substantial and growing number of active partnerships in the for-profit, non-profit, and government arenas. Some of these partners include the mayor of Wilmington, representatives from the District Attorney’s office, County Commissioners, Judges, Police Officers, Social Workers, local business owners, YEZ parents, Health Department officials, community residents, New Hanover County school officials, the local domestic violence service provider, and more.

The BRC is funded through a variety of resources including grants, non-profit organizations, indirect support, corporate organizations, revenue from program initiatives, and other organizations and agencies including the United Way of the Cape Fear Area, City of Wilmington, New Hanover County, New Hanover Regional Medical Center, and New Hanover County Schools. Funding supports BRC programming and two full-time staff members. Additional staff members and interns are supported by external funding sources.

The BRC is a well-established and highly functioning program modeled after a successful community-based initiative. Program staff, active partners, and key stakeholders are committed to serving their community through the mission of the BRC and have confidence in its goals, values, and long-term sustainability. The BRC has the potential to financially support and foster community-led initiatives, minimize food insecurity, increase health care access, increase parent-child connectedness, reduce the juvenile crime rate, narrow the academic achievement gap, lower school drop-out rates, and increase sustainable employment opportunities for YEZ youth and their families, all of which contribute to reductions in multiple forms of violence across the lifespan.