

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

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HAMPTON, VA: A CITY-WIDE EFFORT TO INSTITUTIONALIZE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

BY EMILY KIRBY

In the early 1990s the civic and political leaders of the city of Hampton, VA began a process of including youth in their efforts to restructure the city government and their town. Faced with serious problems of economic development and shrinking local revenues, the city manager and others in Hampton began to look at new ways to give citizens more responsibility for the running of the city. These new efforts to bring citizens back into the legislative process eventually led to a rare type of city planning: planning in which young people are given a voice in decisions affecting the management of city resources.

A new CIRCLE Working Paper by Carmen Sirianni, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at Brandeis University, details the process by which a city itself has taken responsibility to help institutionalize youth civic engagement. The paper also provides suggestions for other cities that wish to embark on this type of government reform.

HOW THEY DID IT: BRINGING YOUNG PEOPLE INTO THE CITY PLANNING PROCESS

Integrating young people into the city planning process did not happen overnight. Instead it evolved out of the growing needs of the city and the ideas of many innovative leaders. In building a system of youth civic engagement, Hampton's leaders focused on several core principles which could be adapted to any city's planning process:

1. First, youth need a wide array of opportunities to contribute actively to the community, from the relatively simple and episodic, such as tutoring a younger child after school or cleaning up a river on the weekend, to the increasingly complex, which might involve long-term planning, policy development, and problem-solving in partnership with other youth and adults.
2. Second, developing civic leadership skills among youth requires the city to make serious investment in training and mentoring by adult professionals. By investing in training, the city enables youth to add genuine public value today as well as to provide an expanded pool of dynamic civic and political leaders for tomorrow's Hampton.
3. Third, productive youth engagement in city affairs is not just a task for young people. It is an ongoing challenge for the adults who run and staff municipal agencies. Effective engagement

requires significant culture change within agencies so that adult staff come to view young people as potential resources and partners, rather than as passive clients to be served or problems to be controlled.

CREATING INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMING BASED ON CORE PRINCIPLES

These principles, in turn, can be seen in many of the programs the city offers to engage young people. For example, in 1997 the city formed the Hampton Youth Commission, which is made up of 24 students from four public and three private high schools. The commission meets twice a month during the school year and then presents formally to the city council twice a year. The commission has been involved in many policy debates and provided much leadership in the development of a joint strategy with the Citizens Unity Commission on supporting diversity in Hampton. In addition, the city offers other programs such as Youth Planners, where two young people each year work for the city planning department, and the Principals' and Superintendents' Advisory Group, a group which includes students from all four public high schools.

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While the early results of Hampton's efforts look promising, there is still much work to be done. Dr. Sirianni concludes, "Hampton provides the most ambitious case to date of institutionalized youth civic engagement across the city in ways that have much in common with other models of youth engagement. None, of course, is without its problems, and much needs to be done in the coming years to make these systems more robust. Together, however, they provide a map of possibilities for how the city—and city government—can be a dynamic generator of democratic public work, co-production, and problem solving." 📌

*Hampton, VA was recently awarded the prestigious **Innovations in American Government Award**, a program of the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and administered in partnership with the Council for Excellence in Government.*