

All Staff are Supportive Adults

Ask Jennie Melde, Director of Community Outreach at the La Crosse Area Family YMCA to describe her Y and she starts with the word “innovative.” And when you dig into the importance of relationships between youth in their programming and Y staff, she adds that all staff at the La Crosse Y are supportive adults. “We don’t have designated positions that have job responsibilities to form supportive relationships,” she said. “Instead all Y staff are equipped and trained to be supportive adults.” That’s how important the La Crosse Y thinks supportive adult relationships are.

Innovative in meeting youth development needs

Like other YMCAs, the La Crosse Y offers the traditional programming for youth – swimming, youth sports, martial arts, dance, music, and opportunities to build confidence. But they go beyond that. In looking at the community needs, they have initiated additional ways that enhance youth development. These include establishing a separate Community Youth Center facility where youth programming takes place, regardless of being Y members or not. The Youth Center builds programming around the foundation of serving supper. Youth ages 10-18 are transported after school and drop in for activities, but most importantly it is a place for youth to engage with supportive adults outside of school and home.

Additionally, the La Crosse Y has a fundamental commitment to mental wellness, weaving mental health into every aspect of their programming. They have a full-time mental health director who is dedicated to integrating mental health training for staff, education for Y families, and social emotional learning for youth into all aspects of the Y.

Additional innovations at the La Crosse Y include:

- Community Health Workers work with referred families to connect them to community resources. These workers address issues such as families experiencing homelessness and chronic school absenteeism by educating, advocating, and navigating for clients and playing a role in their well-being.
- Food access through the Y’s own food pantry.
- “Y on the Fly” which is a van loaded with activities and meals that goes out into neighborhoods.
- Mental health focused Coach Cards that provide tips for Y program coaches to guide them in their interactions with youth.

Collaboration is key

The La Crosse Y believes in getting out in their communities and building partnerships with other organizations. One of the mental health director’s first assignments was to connect with area organizations and dig into how the Y could compliment the community’s youth development work. As a result, new partnerships have formed. Elementary before and after school programs are offered at 15 schools during the school year and summer offering year round programs. The Y has outreach activities in libraries, city parks, other community-based organizations and city housing communities. They also partner with the local technical college who is offering free memberships to their students who are parents.

Understanding the need

To understand and address youth needs in the community Y directors meet regularly with school principals to learn what they are seeing. Identifying the heightened behaviors youth are demonstrating leads to discussions on how both organizations can address them and provide support to youth. Additionally, Y staff regularly discuss what they are seeing in their programs around youth needs. Together they strategize ways they can help. As a result, their staff are engaged in planning, take ownership in their work, and take pride in youth success.

Learn more about the [La Crosse Area Family YMCA](#)



Y staff and youth prepare supper in the Community Youth Center kitchen.